

完整修订版

# 战争

第一部 繁用 一

老猪的作品 ZICHUAN

重燃了战火，燃起战火，燃起战火，燃起战火。  
这不是奇幻，这是可歌可泣的战争。

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# Purple River - Chapter 1

## Victory

So who was the one saying the demon army was too powerful?" Luo Jie, Deputy Banner Master watched satisfyingly as the elites of the Demon Army crumbled at the foot of the mountain like a sand castle in the tide. "Looks like I'm the one who is too powerful."

Deputy Banner Master Bai Chuan gave him a stern look and ignored him.

Deputy Banner Master Chang Chuan commented in a drawn-out fashion: "Just the other day, someone was saying that we are dead for sure this time and we should all run for our lives!"

"There's nothing I hate more than a coward undermining army morale before a battle!" Luo Jie spoke with indignation, as if it had nothing to do with him: "He better hope I don't catch him, or I will hang him on the spot!"

"Are you suffering from memory loses?! The one I'm talking about is you!"

"Huh, when did I say something like that?" He turned to Bai Chuan: "Surely he is talking about you?"

Bai Chuan watched emotionlessly at the two love rivals throwing jabs at each other, and turned the horse around: "I will go check if the Banner Master has any new orders for us."

...

Twenty thousand black riders lined up quietly on top of the hill, not even making the sound of a whisper. The only thing echoed in the air was the discord

caused by the retreating army of Demons in the distant, and the deep humming of the wind sweeping through the plain of Heng Chuan, “Whoosh”, as though the souls of the dead were unwilling to part away from the place of their final demise.

A warrior clad full in silver stood high up at the peak of the hill, his majestic stature and upright torso revealed the kind of respect reserved only for the commanding officer of an army. Brilliant silver radiated from his armour as the dusk fell upon him. In the midst of the sea of black riders, he was as bright as the god himself. Anyone who saw would know that was the trademark silver armour of the youngest, and the most legendary one of the “Three Young Generals of House ZiChuan”, ZiChuan Xiu.

Yet, when Bai Chuan saw the one who had the utmost respect of the entire Far Eastern Army from a distance, she only let out a soundless sigh.

She hurried her ride closer, scanning around, the ones standing guard were all part Banner Master’s personal guards, she whispered: “Gu Lei, are you crazy?! How dare you wear his armour pretending to be Master Xiu?”

“ZiChuan Xiu” (Captain of the Personal Guard – Gu Lei), his face full of chagrin: “Officer Bai Chuan, I don’t want to do it either. Master Xiu insisted me to dress up like this and stand here... It’s so heavy, and I’m so tired, I have already gone through three warhorses...”

“The battle is still in full swing, what is Master Xiu doing?”

Gu Lei: “He just took a shower at the base camp, barbecued some meat and is now asleep.”

...

“Did he leave any instructions?”

Gu Lei: “Ah yes, he did, he said that if we are losing, make sure to wake him up immediately so we can all run for our lives.”

...

Bai Chuan spotted ZiChuan Xiu’s tent underneath the shades. Inside the tent, a man wrapped in the sleeping bag snored rhythmically: “Zzz, Zzz.”

Bai Chuan urged: “Sir, please, wake up...”

But the one in the sleeping bag did not even flinch.

Bai Chuan exhaled in defeat: “Sir, you’re leaving me with no choice...”

With that, she left the tent only to return with a bottle of boiled water in her hand, “I’m going to count, one, two and three!”

“Ok, fine, I surrender, I’m awake.”

He stuck his head out of the sleeping bag, eyes squinted, face still asleep... a pretty handsome young lad nonetheless, or more accurately, a boy if you judged him based on his childish smile.

ZiChuan Xiu: “What is the emergency? Are the demons here?”

Bai Chuan: “...Not yet.”

“Have the soldiers mutinied?”

Bai Chuan: “That is just a matter of time, once they find out you have been messing with them with a fake...”

ZiChuan Xiu: “I will worry about that when it happens... and the officers, all acting like children over something so petty. So did Luo Jie and Chang Chuan fight a duel over you and died?

“Sadly, both of them are still hanging onto their shameless lives. The truth is, we won, and the demons are retreating.”

ZiChuan Xiu looked surprised: “Really? That was unexpected. We actually won?” He stuffed his head back in to the sleeping bag: “Let me think on it.”

Bai Chuan waited patiently... and patiently... Till the snoring sound came once again from inside the sleeping bag: “Zzz, Zzz.”

She finally snapped, and poured the bottle of boiled water...

“Woaaah!”

Imperial Calendar Year 778, a shrieking cry let out by the victor of the third battle of Heng Chuan, was not recorded in the books of history.

# The Truth Behind History

Bai Chuan explained the situation of the battlefield to the half asleep ZiChuan Xiu: “The current situation is that despite their decent defeat, the Demon Army is still over fifty thousand strong, and they have with them the powerful armoured beasts. They almost broke through our defences last time, but somehow for reasons unbeknownst to me, they suddenly decided to retreat, and are in complete disarray. We, the officers in charge can’t agree on whether we should give chase or not. We await your instructions.”

Still muddled from the sleep, ZiChuan Xiu asked: “So who wants to give chase?”

Bai Chuan: “Deputy Banner Master Luo Jie, he advocates for giving chase.”

ZiChuan Xiu: “Then let him.”

“But Sir!” Bai Chuan raised her voice: “I understand the way you feel about Luo Jie, he hasn’t accomplished a single thing since he was promoted to the Deputy Banner Master except being a blowhard, in fact, I feel the same way, but the five thousand soldiers of the Far Eastern Army under his command are innocent, surely they don’t deserve to die with him?”

“Hey, come on now, how can you think that of your commanding officer? Master Bai?” ZiChuan Xiu’s eyes flashed a glint of cunningness, the kind when you are caught red-handed: “Let him go, it will be fine.”

“But the enemy forces total fifty to sixty thousand; Luo Jie’s unit has less than five thousand.”

“Bai Chuan, use your head, Luo Jie’s unit is made up of Cavalry. The mobility of his unit is far superior to those big demon brutes. Even if he can’t beat them, he can at least run, right?”

“But Sir, you know as well as I do, once that idiot Luo Jie starts to charge, he

stops using his head, what if he really forgets to...”

“Don’t worry, I have prepared for all eventualities!”

Facing Bai Chuan’s inquisitive gaze, ZiChuan Xiu took out a flyer from inside the tent, it reads: Imperial Capital Funeral Parlour, from June 1st to August 30th, sixty percent discount, everyone is welcome!

“I did the math, if Luo Jie dies today, we can still make the discount, besides I’m a good friend with the owner, perhaps we can even get the urn box for free...”

...

Bai Chuan rode back to the frontline filled with anger, causing puzzled looks between the other two Deputy Banner Masters.

“Banner Master Xiu orders the Deputy Banner Master Luo to attack!”

Luo Jie cheered loudly: “Long live the king!” as he turned his head towards his men shouting: “Follow me!” and charged forward. Following his lead, five thousand black riders lined up in formation and charged down from top of the hill, hooves thundering, shouts echoing: “Long live the king king king...” Like the descent of a black dragon, his unstoppable force surged downward, pouncing at the retreating Demon Army.

“What an idiot! Still laughing even though he is about to die!” Bai Chuan cursed bitterly.

“Maybe not.” Deputy Banner Master Chang Chuan spoke: “I think the demon army is in shambles, I wonder what happened to them, Luo Jie may actually win.”

Bai Chuan: “So what do you think happened?”

Chang Chuan: “We don’t know, but maybe Master Xiu does. Every time he sent for Luo Jie, it is like he is telling us: The time for thinking has passed; now you just need to charge forward. We will win. I have faith in Master Xiu.”

Bai Chuan sniffed at the thought, thinking: “That is because you haven’t seen him sound asleep at the base camp, getting ready to run away.” She didn’t speak it out loud, fearing it may undermine army morale, or perhaps...

But then the battlefield developed in a way she couldn't believe her eyes: like a hot knife through butter, Luo Jie's force exploded forward, charging almost directly into the heart of the Demon Army. The demons scattered in all directions without even trying to put up a fight, leaving their weapons and armors behind, a complete chaos.

The Demon Army of fifty thousand strong was defeated, no, embarrassed by the Human Army with less than one tenth of their number, the like the history had never seen!

Both Deputy Banner Masters gasped in unison: "But how!"

Chang Chuan shouted: "This can't be real, it must be a trap! Luo Jie is surrounded!"

Bai Chuan shouted back: "It can't be a trap, look at them, the way their forces fled, so disorganized, you can't fake something like that! Even if it was a trap, he still has a chance!"

Bai Chuan turned towards the back, raising her voice while giving the order: "All riders! Forward!"

Chang Chuan stopped her: "You do not have the authority to give that order, only Master Xiu can!"

Bai Chuan replied with a back fist and sent him tumbling down the horseback. Unsheathing her sabre, she laid it against his neck: "If you cost us this opportunity, I will kill you!" She glanced around at the stunned guards and couriers, and gave her order in a deeper voice: "What are you waiting for!"

"Tooooot" Sound of trumpets came from everywhere as the sea of riders began their charge, shouting: "Long live the king king king..." Their voices shock the earth and split the heavens. Twenty thousand sabres danced in the dusk light, engulfing the entire hillside in a breathtaking masterpiece of blood and steel.

...

The noises soon reached the base camp and awoke someone from his dream. He stuck his head out of the sleeping bag, attempting to discern the source of the interruption. Yawn: "So we went on the offensive... Looks like Bai Chuan has noticed... Jeez, if you want to attack then attack, what is the point of shouting,

can't even have a good night sleep over here." He stuffed his head back inside, hoping to find the way back to his sweet dreams earlier.

...

According to House ZiChuan's History Record: Imperial Calendar, Year 778. During the third battle of Heng Chuan, ZiChuan Xiu personally led the charge and fought bravely against the enemy, greatly raising the morale of the soldiers! Under his command, the three Deputy Banner Masters, Luo Jie, Bai Chuan, and Chang Chuan remained calm under pressure and fought fearlessly in a coordinated fashion, allowing their thirty thousand Cavalry forces to achieve a decisive victory over the elite forces of the Demon Army. Over forty thousand of the enemy forces were wounded or killed and over ten thousand were captured. Ge Sha, nicknamed to be the most fearsome demon warrior was slain by Banner Master ZiChuan Xiu himself. It was a heavy blow to the demons and the first turning point in the war of Holy Defence.



## Great Find

"Have we really won?" After reviewing the aftermath of the battle, Zi Chuan Xiu muttered questioningly.

"No doubt about it, Sir, we won big time!" With a really flushed cheek, Captain of the Personal Guard, Gu Lei shouted in excitement: "This is your triumph, Sir, allow me to congratulate you; given what you have accomplished here today, the promotion to the Red Banner Master will only be a formality. Just think about it, not even twenty years old, and you already have the same rank as the Governors of every province. That is a great accomplishment; there haven't been many precedents even in the entire history of the House ZiChuan!"

"Hoho, let me congratulate you back." ZiChuan Xiu smiled at him, absence of joy: "If I remember correctly, you are still just a Banner Warrior, correct? Perhaps becoming the Deputy Banner Master will only be a matter of time."

Gu Lei couldn't be more excited: Thank you, Sir, for your guidance! I will do everything and omit nothing in my service to you, in order to repay the gratitude you have shown me. I won't hesitate to give my life if need be..."

"Uh-huh." ZiChuan Xiu interrupted Gu Lei's monologue of a display of loyalty, and murmured to himself: "It must be a blessing to live a simple life."

"What are you saying, Sir?"

"Oh, I'm just saying to keep up the good work."

...

Not long after, a squad of riders came in to sight. Seeing the banner of ZiChuan Xiu, they immediately dismounted and saluted. ZiChuan Xiu brought his horse to a halt facing the rider: "Which unit are you in? And what is your mission?"

Calvary Captain replied: "We are part of Luo Jie's unit, third battalion seventh company. We are currently transporting the captives."

"Oh? ZiChuan Xiu suddenly found himself intrigued:" Are there many captives? Show me."

"As you wish, Sir!" The Captain gave a shout towards the back, ordering the riders to whip the captives forward and await inspection. The personal guards immediately surrounded ZiChuan Xiu, fearing a potential outburst from any of the demon prisoners. But that wasn't necessary at all. This group of captives are all goblins... some green skinned dwarves. They are incredibly handy little fellows, but can hardly put up a fight. They are tame by nature, easy to control. Even amongst the Demon Army, they are mostly handling the non-combative labours. You can purchase goblin servants from the human markets too; the words are that in the capital, the price goes up to thirty thousand per head.

Calvary Captain seemed to have noticed the slight disappointment in ZiChuan Xiu's expressions, feeling embarrassed. In an attempt to please his superior, he offered: "Sir, you may not know, but we found something strange amongst the prisoners."

"Oh?"

Captain gave another shout towards the back: "Show it to Master Xiu!"

Several riders marched forward, dragging a big bulging sack behind them. The Captain began to untie the ropes, showing a flattering smile: "Sir, this is the rarest of goods."

With that, he revealed what was inside the sack, a young female, a pretty one!

ZiChuan Xiu gave the Captain a frown: "Since when have the Far Eastern Army become kidnappers?"

Captain complained in earnest: "But Sir, she is not just some average girl! We found her inside a well-embroidered carriage; she even had dozens of guards protecting her. Many of my men were wounded in the process of capturing her! She is definitely someone important, probably someone with titles in the Demon's Court!"

"Has she been questioned?"

"She didn't say anything, and we didn't have the time to question her thoroughly. But we can leave her in your care, Sir; surely you don't want to miss

out on this opportunity!" The captain spoke suggestively.

And ZiChuan Xiu replied with a sense of acknowledgement: "Hohoho, I definitely will... question her thoroughly." Those were the words from one man to another, something a man would understand merely from the tone of the voice, ranks did not matter.

As soon as the Calvary Squad disappeared from sight, ZiChuan Xiu let out a streak of evil laughter: "Luckily that bitch Bai Chuan wasn't around, or else this could proof problematic." He turned towards Gu Lei and the rest of the personal guards: "If Bai Chuan asks about it... I hope you all know what to do, right?"

Gu Lei answered with a straight face: "Rest assured, Sir, we saw nothing, we heard nothing!"

"Smart man!" ZiChuan Xiu surveyed his surroundings: "So where can I set up a camp without risking being interrupted? Can't do it over there, too barren, lack of romantic scenery, not here either, too many mosquitoes, they may ruin the mood..." He rambled on while eyeing the young girl with his lecherous gaze, till she finally...

"I'm the third Princess of the God King, Ka Dan. I'm a royalty. I demand to be treated in a way deserving of someone of my stature!" The girl spoke with her trembling voice, trying desperately to appear dignified.

All the guards gasped in unison, making it sound much louder than usual.

Gu Lei whispered: "If I may, Sir, you mustn't touch this girl, or you may incur the wrath from the Department of Military Justice!"

ZiChuan Xiu responded without so much as turning his head: "Gu Lei, you pig-brained fool!" He grumbled: "This is a great find!"

# True Self

Riding in the dark with her fellow riders, Bai Chuan found herself lost in thought: the joy of victory earlier today did not dispel her doubts, how did we win so easily? The Demons had the advantage, yet they suddenly retreated; and when the Calvary of House ZiChuan attacked, they were barely met with any organized resistance... that was not the usual etiquette of the powerful and the fierce Demon Army.

But in the end a victory is a victory, irreplaceable and beyond doubt. The sea of Demon corpses stretched as far as the eyes can see, like the crops in the fall, waiting to be harvest... that was the proof. Only then did she realize her back was soaked in sweat. If there was the slightest error in her judgement, then the ones lying on the ground right now would have been the riders of House ZiChuan. And she would have to take responsibility for it. Even if she was fortunate enough to survive the battle, she wouldn't be able to escape the punishment from the Military Constables of Ministry of Supervision[1]... I can't take any more risks, she thought, surely the goddess of luck would not be so generous, to look after the same person twice.

"Stop chasing." She gave the order.

Like taking a weight off their shoulders, the riders brought their horses to a swift halt. They were completely exhausted after chasing five hours nonstop, but none dared to suggest it to their lady tyrant... Everyone saw what happened to Chang Chuan the last time he tried. For the common soldiers, she seemed way scarier than the supposedly invincible Demon God King himself.

"All units make camp, send out the scouts, increase the number of guards assigned to each sentry post at night time from four to eight, double the scout's recon range and light torches as warning!"

The couriers left as soon as she finished, Bai Chuan went on: "From now on,

Deputy Banner Master Chang Chuan is in charge of the camp, I will go see Master Xiu.”

Chang Chuan stepped out behind the riders with an inhospitable look on his face: “So, I’m in charge? Is Master Bai not afraid of me taking all the credit for myself?”

In return, Bai Chuan gave him the sweetest of all smiles, and instantly, Chang Chuan’s anger subsided over half, and the rest... well, it no longer mattered.

“Are you still mad at me? I’m apologizing to you now, aren’t I? Chang Chuan, you are a man amongst men, surely you won’t stoop down to the level of a girl, right?”

Chang Chuan’s mouth twisted into a wry grin: “Fine, you win. It is not like I haven’t been hit by you before.”

“I’ll let you in on something, I just questioned some of the captives and they told me a strange story. They said that during the attack, their Commander Ge Sha and Deputy Commander Yun Shen were both assassinated. Without the head of their chain of command, their morale buckled and their forces collapsed on its own.”

“Really!” Bai Chuan was taken by surprise: “Who did it? They sure did us a big favour.”

“I only know it was done by a Human... as you may already know, for a demon, we all look the same, in a sense, it is just like how those green skinned monsters all look the same to us. Anyways, he was a very terrifying human according to the demons; he hid himself in the sand and waited for the Demon Commanders to walk past him before he struck them down from below. Both of them were killed in one stroke. ”

Bai Chuan considered the possibility: “I didn’t know someone like that existed in the Far Eastern regions, not only skilled, but also patient and ruthless. To hide himself in the sand....” She shuddered at the thought.

Chang Chuan: “I believe that our Banner Master must have known. Or he wouldn’t have given us the order to attack...”

Just the mentioning of his name made Bai Chuan flare up in anger: “You think

too highly of that idiot! Did you know what he was doing when we were risking our lives? Shower, dinner and sleep... the only thing he didn't do was fooling around with some woman... and the only reason for that was probably because he didn't manage to find one. Which part of him looks like an army commander to you...?

Chang Chuan replied in a leisurely fashion: "As long as we are victorious, he can do whatever he pleases, it doesn't matter to me one bit. But what is making you so angry?" He glanced at Bai Chuan, hinting at the deeper meaning within the words.

"He got lucky this time that something happened to the Demons!"

"I doubt it is just luck. This time maybe, but what about six years ago during the counterattack at the Capital, was that a fluke as well? Both Subjugation Wars against House Liu Feng, only his army made it back in one piece. And three years ago, when we encountered Liu Feng Shuang, only his army escaped their encirclement without sustaining any casualties... For an idiot who enlisted at the age of eleven, and gone through, big or small, seventy battles, but never lost once... Surely he can't be that lucky?"

...

Bai Chuan rode forth in the darkness while Chang Chuan's words echoed in her head: "Indeed, surely that idiot can't be that lucky... Can he be hiding his true self all along?"

Right, I must confront him face to face and uncover his true self underneath his lazy, cowardly and perverted appearance!

The lamp lights of the main encampment shined in the darkness, before ZiChuan Xiu's personal guards could have reacted, Bai Chuan had already entered the camp.

Gu Lei, Captain of the Personal Guard stepped forth to meet her: "Deputy Banner Master Bai, Master Xiu's orders, you may not go inside!"

"Why? Bai Chuan ignored him, thinking: "Could this be the one moment he is showing his true self? I have to get inside!"

Without giving it a second thought, she entered the main tent of the camp,

but what greeted her was the sight of ZiChuan Xiu attempting to kiss an innocent young girl in his arms...

Unspeakable anger instantly rose up from inside of her as she lashed out with her sabre in hand: “So this is ZiChuan Xiu’s true self! Prepare to die!”

# Heroic Return

"Woah, luckily I stepped away in time, you almost cut me in half!"

ZiChuan Xiu had yet to fully recover his senses: "Master Bai, you are being way too reckless... Do I really look like some pervert who would force myself on some innocent young girl? And you, Gu Lei, what are you looking at?"

Bai Chuan argued back unconvinced: "Sir, if you put yourself in my shoes and you saw some pervert holding an innocent young girl alone in the dark... What would you think?"

ZiChuan Xiu: "Well, I would think that the girl must be the third Princess of Demons, a very important hostage and military asset. The shock of her predicament must have been too much for her to bear, causing her to lose consciousness. This is why, your honorable and gentlemanly commanding officer selflessly and without ulterior motives, tried to give her a mouth to mouth resuscitation.... That is what I would think!"

Bai Chuan: "Fuck that... There is no way in hell anyone would think like that!"

ZiChuan Xiu: "Then clearly, you haven't seen enough soap operas; this is like one of its typical scenarios!"

Bai Chuan: "What are you talking about, Sir?"

ZiChuan Xiu: "Oh, never mind, I messed up the time, pretend I never said anything."

Bai Chuan: "But even if the Demon Princess really did faint and needed resuscitation, surely anyone could have done it, why does it have to be you, Sir?"

ZiChuan Xiu: "If anyone can do it, why can't I?"

...

ZiChuan Xiu: "Give me your report, Master Bai."



Bai Chuan: "As you wish, Sir. After five hours of fighting the demons have sustained somewhere between twenty and thirty thousand casualties. We have captured their main camp and supply wagons. This time the Demon Army brought with them fifty three white cloaks in total. (White Cloaks are the battalion commanders in the Demon Army, they wore the white cloaks) My unit took down twenty one, while Chang Chuan's unit killed nineteen and captured three. The whereabouts of the rests are unknown.

ZiChuan Xiu: "Deputy Banner Master Luo Jie just sent me his report. He took down seven White Cloaks, and a rough estimate puts his kill count at above ten thousand, which means the main force for the Demon Army no longer exists. All that left is the cleanup work.

Bai Chuan bowed: "This is a great victory, Sir. Congratulations. You did a great job!" She cursed under her breath: "Indeed, sleeping, eating, and fooling around with some woman...what a great job."

"Ho, those were some really kind words, Master Bai... But truth be told, I did do a great job. However, after a day of hard work, it's time for me to rest... So I'll have to trouble you once more, Master Bai, the security of the main camp will have to fall on your shoulders!"

Bai Chuan gave him the middle finger behind her back while asking politely: "Sir, there is just that one thing troubling me."

ZiChuan Xiu: "Oh?"

Bai Chuan: According to the prisoners, the reason for their recent defeat has to do with the sudden assassination of both their Commander and Deputy Commander, but none of the officers in the frontline knew about this mysterious assassin. I can't help but wonder how you become aware of this, thus giving us the order to attack?"

ZiChuan Xiu looked surprised: "You said I gave the orders? Is that what happened? I remembered it differently. Weren't you, Master Bai the one who gave the orders?"

Bai Chuan: "But Sir, didn't you say..."

ZiChuan Xiu: "Well, when you came to me for instructions, you told me that

Luo Jie wanted to attack, and I told you to let them do whatever they want... Was that not true? In other words, from the very beginning till the end, everything was decided by you and Luo Jie, correct? So when did I give you the order to launch an all out attack?"

Thinking back, that was indeed the case, but ZiChuan Xiu's tone of voice seemed to suggest that... Luckily we won, or else, I would have to shoulder all the blame... Suddenly she could feel the cold sweat dripping down her back.

"You have nothing to fear, because you won. I doubt the Ministry of Supervision will bother investigate you for having purposely communicated a false order." ZiChuan Xiu seemed to have guessed Bai Chuan's thought as he spoke casually: "We are heading back to the City of Sha Jia tomorrow, leave the cleanup work to the unit of Banner Master Ge Xi."

Bai Chuan insisted: "But Sir, it was our efforts that led to this victory, we should be the ones to give chase!"

ZiChuan Xiu: "If we take all the credits for ourselves, then the other units will get jealous... which in turn will make our lives harder later on."

With that, he walked lazily towards the tent: "It is getting late, Master Bai, you should rest as well. We still have a long road ahead of us."

Bai Chuan suddenly realized: The heroic triumph over eighty thousand demon forces with only thirty thousand men, no one can take that away from him. He might as well act generously and let the others have a small piece of the pie... What a cunning and crafty mind! Watching his shadow slowly disappear in the dark, she felt like she knew less and less about him by the second...

...

The next nightfall, ZiChuan Xiu's unit returned victorious to the City of Sha Jia and its citizens gave them an almost frantic welcome. The city of Sha Jia was situated closely to the Heng Chuan frontline. Whenever the demons invaded, they were almost always the ones to take the blunt of the attack, especially since the Far Eastern Army of House ZiChuan had been failing thus far, always losing more battles than winning. Therefore the citizens often had to run for their lives, it was not a pretty sight. So this time, upon hearing the news that House ZiChuan put an eighteen year old young Banner Master in charge of the defence against

the demonic invasion, everyone had already given up hope and began packing their belongings, readying themselves for the eventual evacuation. They all assumed the only reason he was able to reach the rank of Banner Master at his age was due to his name, ZiChuan. But somehow, not sure which goddess' ass this young Banner Master ended up kissing, the Demon Army collapsed on its own... Once the news arrived, the whole city was lit up with joy and celebrations!

The welcoming crowd almost overwhelmed ZiChuan Xiu's troops when they marched into the city.

The citizens gave the soldiers all kind of worthless gifts: half baked eggs, sweat soaked handkerchiefs, silverwares and even potentially dangerous exploding cotton balls... Everyone was drowned in alcohol long passed their expiration dates! As it turned out, thirty seven tavern owners managed to avoid bankruptcy because of it, while eleven other tavern owners had their entire tavern smashed by the drunken soldiers and ended up bankrupt...

The monks prayed in their name: "Thank you, our ever victorious guardians! May the god of war forever be at your side!" Normally nobody believed in their god, but it just happened that today was the day they were allowed to spread their prayers in peace without being thrown at...

Many pretty girls holding flowers also managed to dance their way into the arms and mouths of the soldiers whom they didn't even know the names of... According to the statistics, within the hour of entering the city, over seven thousand soldiers of ZiChuan Xiu's unit had lost their first kiss which they had planned to save for their future lovers, the lost was catastrophic! Naturally, many touching love stories which will be remembered for the ages to come also began its first chapter there and then. Someone later calculated, despite the fact that ZiChuan Xiu's unit stayed for less than a week in the city of Sha Jia, ten months later, the city's birth rate was increased by 169%! And most of the newborns were even named as "Huai Jun", "Nian Jun" and "Ai Jun" ...[1]

...

After nightfall, Luo Jie, Bai Chuan and Chang Chuan patrolled the streets, checking on the soldiers if they had violated any of the army regulations or had been causing problems.

Chang Chuan: “Bai Chuan, is there something wrong with you today? It has been twelve hours, and not once have you cursed Master Xiu’s name... Are you all right?”

Luo Jie pretended to feel Bai Chuan’s forehead: “Hmm, it is definitely hot, you must be ill... Ouch!”

Bai Chuan retracted her fist: “It’s nothing. I just changed my mind about him. That is all...” Suddenly ZiChuan Xiu’s voice came from a small tavern: “How much for a bottle of Greenland Beer?”

The serving lady replied: “Three silver coins, officer.”

ZiChuan Xiu: “Oh, even more expensive than in the Capital... I’ll have two!”

Serving Lady: “Excuse me officer, are you serving in ZiChuan Xiu’s army?”

ZiChuan Xiu: “I am!”

Serving Lady: “Oh, our owner has left words. Tonight, everything for ZiChuan Xiu’s Army is on the house!”

ZiChuan Xiu: “Why is that?”

Serving Lady: “Because you are all heroes!”

ZiChuan Xiu: “Heroes huh... I will take four bottles!”

Serving Lady: “...”

...

Luo Jie turned to Bai Chuan: “You were saying you changed your mind about him...”

Bai Chuan[2] answered coldly: “And now I’ve changed my mind again... Let’s go, we don’t know him!”

## Promotion

Fort Warren, also known as the greatest fortress on this side of the world, (except for the great Demon God Fortress in the land of Demons) built in Imperial Calendar, Year 456. It is an impregnable fortress guarding the only access point into the heart of House ZiChuan from the Far Eastern Regions, the Chang He Highway. There had been rumors floating around stating that: “Inside the Fort Warren, you are safe from even the wrath of Gods!” The evidence did seem to support such outrageous claim. The Demons had launched four major invasions in the past. Each time House ZiChuan relied on the thick walls of Fort Warren to repel the invaders, each time the powerful Demon horde was forced to return, with wounded pride.

The former head of the family, a famous general at the time, ZiChuan Yuan Xing once said: “Without Warren, we would have been wiped out twenty times over.” The fact that both the General Headquarters and Base Camp of the Far Eastern Army were located in Fort Warren showed its importance.

ZiChuan Xiu and many others who had rendered great military service during the Heng Chuan campaign received an invitation to join Deputy Commander Luo Bo at the Far Eastern Army’s General Staff Department in Fort Warren. Alas...

The gorgeous secretary politely informed ZiChuan Xiu: “Master Xiu, I’m sorry. Deputy Commander Lin Bin suddenly decided to hold a military conference. Commander Luo is thus still unavailable. He did say to have you wait in the drawing room in case you arrived early. I’m terribly sorry.”

ZiChuan Xiu leaned sternly next to her face while looking suspiciously to the sides, then whispered to her: “Miss, do you recognize that man wearing the Banner Warrior’s uniform?” He pointed at a young officer coming out of the Headquarter Building.

“Oh, that is the Communication Officer sent by Banner Master Ge Xi of the

South Eastern Army. He just delivered a document to Deputy Commander Luo's office..."

"He is a fake!" ZiChuan Xiu spoke adamantly: "He is an assassin sent by the House Liu Feng!"

Colours instantly fled from her cheeks: "But he had a valid Military ID and Access Pass, even the document..."

"Do you doubt my words? Well, I don't blame you. I saw the real Communication Officer on my way here, and he told us everything before he died." ZiChuan Xiu spoke with utmost conviction: "Commander Luo is his target! Where has the assassin been to? We have to perform a thorough search!"

The young secretary was completely indoctrinated by ZiChuan Xiu's overwhelming display of confidence: "He just went inside Deputy Commander Luo's office, but he only stayed for five minutes and I was with him the whole time..."

"Give me the keys!" Without explaining, ZiChuan Xiu took the keys from her: "Five minutes? He is a professional spy, five minutes is enough to plant over thirty bombs!"

With that, he walked into the office, closing the door behind him: "Till the danger passes, nobody is to be allowed inside!"

Once the Staff Department of the Far Eastern Army fell into chaos, the Military Constables quickly arrived to the scene, but were ordered by ZiChuan Xiu to stay out of the office. Only the sound of maddened table flipping and Master Xiu's murmuring could be heard on the outside: "Where? Where is it? Come out this instant, I know you have been hiding them... I won't stop till I find it!"

The crisis went on for five full minutes, until Master Xiu emerged from the door drenched in sweat: "I didn't manage to find any... He must have planted it elsewhere!"

Since all officers, constables and staffs present were gaining a new found respect for Master Xiu's bravery and calmness in the face of crisis, no one noticed the strange bulge in his briefcase... even the sound of bottles bumping into each other went unnoticed.

Deputy Commander Luo only found out about it after the conference. Even though he rushed back as fast as he could, the content of his personal safe was long gone. His outcry could be heard everywhere in the building!

Everyone thought the Liu Feng spy must have gotten away with some super secret documents...

Deputy Commander Luo Bo gritted his teeth: "Ah Xiu, what have you done?!"

ZiChuan Xiu replied with great trepidation: "Ah Yes! It's my fault! I shouldn't have acted so recklessly without confirming my suspicions first. I have caused chaos to the department, and wrongfully accused an innocent fellow officer, leading to his arrest. Please accept my sincere apologies!"

Lu Bo roared: "I don't give a hoot about that Banner Warrior!" Lowering his voice: "Where are my bottles? My three hundred year old wine and royal brandy!"

ZiChuan Xiu looked confused... as though he had never heard of the word "bottle" before: "What bottles?"

"Stop pretending! The ones you stole from my..." Luo Bo suddenly stopped himself.

"Are you sure, Sir? The Far Eastern Army Regulation clearly states that, during service hours, alcohol is strictly forbidden. Could there be alcohol in your office, Sir? Surely that can't be true. Everyone in the Far Eastern Army knows you for your discipline and rectitude. There is no way something like that could have happened. Someone must be spreading false rumours with the intent to tarnish your reputation, but don't you worry, I have complete faith in you, Sir!"

Luo Bo begged in earnest: "Come on, don't be like that... Just give me my Brandy back."

ZiChuan Xiu's answer was a simple and mysterious smile... a smile Luo Bo knew all too well... This was not the first time he suffered at his hands.

"Fine, you got me! There won't be a next time."

"The official decree has arrived: Banner Master ZiChuan Xiu's outstanding performance during the Battle of Heng Chuan has brought honor to the family.

After consulting with the Council of Elders, the High Command has decided to commend Banner Master ZiChuan Xiu for his efforts and promote him to the rank of...”

Luo Bo purposely drew out his voice: “...Deputy Commander! Issued by: Supreme Commander Yang Ming Hua. Approved by: Chief of Staff Luo Ming Hai, Far Eastern Army Commander Ge Ying Xing, Border Army Commander Ming Hui, Central Army Commander Lei Xun, Black Banner Army Commander Fang Jin, and Imperial Guard Army Commander Pi Gu. Imperial Calendar, Year 778 July 28th”

ZiChuan Xiu could not believe what he just heard: “Deputy Commander! Promoted from Banner Master directly to Deputy Commander, skipping the rank of Red Banner Master entirely!” That was not what he expected...



# The Past

Far Eastern Army Fort Warren Staff Department

“Ah Xiu, do you realize why Yang Ming Hua promoted you straight to Deputy Commander? Luo Bo glanced at him with a gloomy expression, lacking any of the usual joy he should have when promoting one of his own men.

“Yes Sir, I do.”

“Oh?”

ZiChuan Xiu spoke with the same kind of seriousness: “It basically means... that I can start hiring a pretty doll like secretary too, for science of course and hiding alcohol in the office without fearing the inspection from the Ministry of Supervision!”

“Dickhead, why don’t you use that head of yours for once and take a good look at the decree: It is ordered by Supreme Commander Yang Ming Hua!”

“So then...”

“You should know better than me what kind of person he really is, right?”

ZiChuan Xiu readily recited: “Our esteemed Supreme Commander Yang Min Hua, at work he is wise, decisive in battle, brilliant and shows great foresight; at home he is morally impeccable, in possession of a great character, kind to his men, strict with himself, lenient towards others, loved by all, loyal to a fault to the Head of the family and most importantly, he is completely selfless as he always puts the family interest above his personal gain. No matter whether it is his kindness, wisdom or bravery, he can be seen as the role model for every soldier in the Army in service of House ZiChuan. He has my utmost respect! We are blessed by god to have someone like him amongst us, may he live forever, his contribution to the cause has been...”

Luo Bo interrupted him: “Enough, I don’t have “Eyes and Ears” around here,

you may speak your mind.”

ZiChuan Xiu revealed his signature smile of innocence again: “What do you mean, Sir? Those were the words from the bottom of my heart. Please believe me Sir, my love and admiration for the Supreme Commander is coming from the bottom of my heart...”

Luo Bo stared at him, eyes unflinching, trying to detect the slightest hint of pretentiousness in his smile... “ZiChuan Xiu’s smile” later became a common idiom used to describe people like sales agents or insurance companies making false promises. And like always, Luo Bo was left empty handed.

“I hope you haven’t forgotten what happened seven years ago.”

...

Imperial Calendar, Year 771 March, House Liu Feng launched a large scale invasion against House ZiChuan. The Army of House Liu Feng took a hidden path and circumvented Border Army’s defence lines, appearing undetected outside the walls of the Capital. The former Head of the Family, ZiChuan Yuan Xing thought it was a small group of enemy separated from their main force, instead of waiting for the reinforcements, he attacked with the Central Army and Imperial Guard Army stationed inside the Capital. The result was a bloody massacre that almost completely annihilated the Central Army and Imperial Guard Army. The death toll numbered over eighty thousand and ZiChuan Yuan Xing was gravely wounded during the battle as well. Only then did they find out, the ambush was led by the heir to the House Liu Feng, the cunning and calculated Liu Feng Xi Shan. His forces numbered over hundred-thirty thousand!

Liu Feng Xi Shan believed the outcome to be certain, thus instead of trying to breach the thick walls of the Capital, he divided his remaining forces in two and sent fifty thousand back to encircle the Border Army while leaving fifty thousand infantry to besiege the Capital. The Far Eastern Army at the time found themselves at a critical juncture in the war against the Demons, while both the Border Army and Black Banner Army were pinned down by the Army of House Liu Feng. With barely any able bodies and capable generals left inside the Capital, and no help on the way, fear overwhelmed the City. Everyone thought that was the end of House ZiChuan!

With Far Eastern Army Commander Ge Ying Xing's acquiescence, (He was also the Principal of the Far Eastern Army Academy) ZiChuan Xiu who was only a student at the time, used "Military Exercise" as an excuse and led a group of 800 Cavalry trainees back to the capital, where he got to see his stepfather ZiChuan Yuan Xing for the last time.

After Yuan Xing's death, the House was left in disarray. The Council of Elders, the House of Headmaster, the High Command and the Army Administrative Office all blamed each other, and while denying their own responsibility. They each advocated their own plans which they believed would save the House from its imminent destruction, but could not agree on a single course of action. Endless votes were taken, and countless conferences, debates and elections were held, but no one knew how to handle the fifty thousand menacing Liu Feng soldiers outside the city walls. In a sudden burst of rage, ZiChuan Xiu led the 800 Cavalry trainees he brought back from the frontlines and instigated a coup, seizing power and control of the House of Headmaster, the High Command, Army Administrative Office and other military sites of strategic importance. After seizing operational control, he immediately gave out the emergency order to every commander in every garrison; ordering them to return to the Capital within the month, which was impossible of course. Even if they did, after dealing with the ambushes on the way back, there wouldn't be much of an army left by the time they arrived. Not to mention the other Liu Feng forces they would have freed up in the process.

Everyone in the Liu Feng camp laughed hysterically at the new Headmaster of House ZiChuan, an eleven year old child who just gave the order to send every last one of his men to their doom. The laughter continued till that dreadful night, the same night the orders were given. 800 riders under ZiChuan Xiu's command snuck into the main camp of Liu Feng Army wearing their uniforms. Once inside, they set the camp alight, killing and spreading rumours that the main force of Far Eastern Army has arrived and all of House ZiChuan's forces have gathered, over a million strong in total!"

The Army of Liu Feng woke up into a nightmare of fire and swords... they couldn't possibly have put up an effective defence... not that there was a way they could have defended in the first place. Everyone was wearing the same

uniform and the one shouting: “Don’t attack! We are on your side, the enemies are over there!” was often the one stabbing you in the back... Under such situation where one could not separate friend from foe, the only way to survive was to be the first one to strike. As a result, over half of the twenty thousand casualties the Army of Liu Feng sustained that night, was due to friendly fire.

Even Liu Feng Xi Shan himself only barely escaped with his life. He had hoped to be able to regroup and counter attack when the light dawned, but before he could gather his forces, ZiChuan Xiu’s riders had already appeared. Another battle later, the defeated army was defeated once more. Later that night, Liu Feng Xi Shan tried again, hoping to regain control of his scattered forces and yet again, just when his forces were about to gather, the hooves of the pursuing riders sounded behind them...

The exact same scenario happened seven times!

By the eighth time, Liu Feng Xi Shan’s forces have already retreated to the border of the two houses. Waiting in front of them, was the three hundred thousand vengeful and angry soldiers of the Border Army of House ZiChuan, and behind them, was the ferocious pursuing riders led by ZiChuan Xiu... He would rather kill himself than to face ZiChuan Xiu again. The only reason he escaped alive that day, was due to his daughter, Liu Feng Shuang’s reinforcement, and a little bit of luck... Many war historians later believed that if ZiChuan Xiu was allowed to continue his pursuit, even with Liu Feng Shuang’s reinforcement, Liu Feng Xi Shan wouldn’t have been able to escape, even less inheriting the seat of House Liu Feng on his return.

But the two hundred thousand soldiers brought here by Liu Feng Xi Shan did not have such a daughter or luck, less than one third of them made it back alive.

On the side of House ZiChuan, the victor fared even worse than the loser. ZiChuan Xiu had hoped to be received by pretty girls with flowers, but instead, all he got was a rude awakening in the middle of the night during his pursuit, and to find out that his personal guards had all been disarmed. His entire camp was surrounded by a sea of Military Constables from the Ministry of Supervision and if he had so much as moved a muscle, he would have been executed on the spot...

A rather well mannered Constable shamelessly informed him: “By Supreme Commander Yang Ming Hua’s order, you have been accused of “Inciting a mutiny”, “Insubordination”, “Unlawful force deployments” and “Intentional misconduct”. Therefore you have been removed from active duty, effect immediately. You have the right to remain silence, and you have the right to appeal at the Court Martial.

Every one of those crimes was punishable by death.

Luckily, the outcome was influenced by the support of ZiChuan Yuan Xing’s daughter, the help from the Far Eastern Army Commander Ge Ying Xing, and a fierce protest from the frontline soldiers. Also, his good friend Stirling, one of the three legendary young generals of House ZiChuan, delivered a heartfelt testimony at the Court Martial, declaring: “Loyalty is not a crime!” Thus, ZiChuan Xiu was absolved of the death penalty.

Yang Ming Hua wanted to imprison him for life, but Far Eastern Army Commander Ge Ying Xing took the initiative: “Why don’t we let him serve in the harsh Far Eastern Regions? We need more men over there.” Due to Ge Ying Xing’s reputation, and the undeniable strength of the Far Eastern Army, Yang Ming Hua still had to respect his wishes... That was how ZiChuan Xiu ended up in the Far Eastern Army. From slave soldier, to Warrior, Banner warrior, Red Bannerman, Deputy Banner Master and finally, Banner Master...

...

And now Yang Ming Hua wished to promote him directly to Deputy Commander!

“My memories has never been very good, I’m not sure what exactly you are referring to from seven years ago? Can you give me a hint, Sir?”

Luo Bo: “Ah Xiu, you know what they say, keep your friends close, but your enemies closer... A certain someone might want to keep someone of your skills and abilities very close indeed. If he lets you become a Red Banner Master like you are supposed to, you would have hundred thousand Far Eastern Army soldiers under your command... and that would cause certain someone many sleepless nights.”

ZiChuan Xiu: “But promoting me to Deputy Commander, won’t that certain

someone have even more difficulty getting a good night sleep?”

“The problem is, the Far Eastern Army’s military structure only allows for three active Deputy Commanders at a time, we don’t have extra divisions to place under your command...Now do you understand?”

“But I heard two days ago, Deputy Commander Lei was having some irreconcilable differences with Commander Ge Ying Xing and wanted to resign... which means you do have a place for me here.”

“Well, they reconciled this morning, and Deputy Commander Lei has retracted his letter of resignation.”

“I also heard our Deputy Commander Lin Bin is getting married, and will go on a honeymoon for three months?”

“Well, her fiancé fled before the wedding, leaving only a note saying: I can’t take this anymore! So that old virgin who just had her love turn into hate is about to send a kill squad after him...”

ZiChuan Xiu sighed in defeat: “Then you are my only hope, Sir. Is there any chance for your gastrohelcosis to turn into cancer any time soon...”

Luo Bo: “...”

“As I said, now that you are promoted to Deputy Commander, your only choice is to return to the Capital and be on reserve duty till further notice. Commander Ge Ying Xing believes that to be the best course of action as well, because Lady ZiChuan Ning has almost come of age (16), and will soon reach the lawful age for her succession. It is very likely that certain someone may try to assassinate her. By going to the Capital, you can protect her.”

“But I’m terrible in a fight...”

“Drop the act... save it for the idiots like Luo Jie! The one who assassinated the Demon Commanders in Heng Chuan was you right? I understand, you don’t want that “someone” to know about your true skills and abilities, but do you really think you can fool me?”

ZiChuan Xiu looked surprised: “You...”

Luo Bo revealed a cunning smile: “I’m a servant to the House ZiChuan, not a

servant to Yang Ming Hua. The one I made my vow to is named ZiChuan.”

“But Yang Ming Hua is your superior...”

“I’m a Deputy Commander in the Far Eastern Army; my direct commanding officer is Commander Ge Ying Xing.” Lu Bo spoke amiably: “Commander Ge has asked me to take good care of you!”

Thinking back over the past six years and the meticulous care and kindness Luo Bo had shown him, ZiChuan Xiu couldn’t help but feel a sudden surge of warmth in his chest. He gave the old man in front of him a deep bow: “My humble self does not deserve what you and Commander Ge Ying Xing have done for me over the years... I can never repay your kindness in this life time! But if you ever have the need of me, I will do everything I can even at the cost of my own life!”

Luo Bo stood up gracefully: “Current Supreme Commander Yang Ming Hua is above the law and unmatched in power; he has already shown his unwillingness to serve! I, as an elder of the Family, am ordering you, Deputy Commander ZiChuan Xiu; keep Lady ZiChuan Ning safe, no matter what! She is the only surviving bloodline of the former Headmaster, ZiChuan Yuan Xing.”

He gave a bow to ZiChuan Xiu in return: “Ah Xiu, I’m counting on you!”

ZiChuan Xiu held his head up high: “Yes Sir! As long as I’m alive, I will not let harm come to Lady Ning! You can count on me!” Then he bowed deeply in return, feeling a sense of pride swirling in his chest.

“Oh, there is one more thing. Didn’t you just say you would repay me with your life? Well, how about my bottles...”

ZiChuan Xiu answered defiantly: “No way! I was just being polite... three hundred year old wine and royal brandy... they worth way more than my life! I won’t give them back even if I die!”

## Xiu's Company

At the most exclusive (also the most expensive) Heaven's Dream restaurant in City Warren, Luo Jie, Bai Chuan and Chang Chuan celebrated their promotion to Banner Masters and arranged a farewell banquet for their commanding officer, Deputy Commander ZiChuan Xiu, for getting reassigned to the Capital!

Bai Chuan took a look at the menu, and felt a bit shaken by what she saw: so expensive!

She whispered to Luo Jie: "Are you sure you brought enough money?"

Luo Jie whispered back bitterly: "At worst we will have to pawn you off for payment. Why did Commander Xiu choose a place like this? One dinner is going to cost me half year's worth of my salary... and that is only when it is shared between the three of us."

Bai Chuan (whisper): "I suspect that idiot is purposely trying to mess with us. Just look at the dishes he ordered... Golden Roasted Piglet, Golden Broiled lobster, Golden Grilled Chicken, Golden Roasted Duck, Golden Fruit Basket, Golden Flossed Vegetables and Golden Brandy... so much gold, I hope he bloody dies from constipation!"

Luo Jie (whisper): "Shh, keep it down! I saw him eyeing you suspiciously; he may have overheard us... Ah, shit, he is making another order... it is the Eight Golden Treasures of the Royal Palace! Fuck, my next year's salary is now gone as well!"

...

ZiChuan Xiu and Chang Chuan were having a good time, but then he suddenly turned around: "Bai Chuan, Luo Jie, what are you two talking about?"

Bai Chuan: "Sir, you are getting reassigned. You won't be our commander officer anymore... We feel really sad; we are going to miss you."



ZiChuan Xiu: “Oh ho, now that you mention it, I feel really sad as well... But you don’t look very heartbroken about it... you look more like... someone who just got liberated.”

Bai Chuan: “Well, even though we are laughing on the outside, we are actually crying on the inside, Sir!”

Luo Jie and Chang Chuan both felt the same way: They are both crying on the inside... in silence... for their wallet...

ZiChuan Xiu rubbed his eyes, feeling a bit overwhelmed with emotions: “I’m so fortunate to have served with good men like you! Perhaps I should stay...”

“Don’t!”

Chang Chuan, Luo Jie and Bai Chuan shouted in unison!

“Sir, we don’t want be the ones to keep you from your dreams!” (Yes, leave; go torment the idiots in the Capital!)

“Yes, Sir, but do come back and visit us when you have time!” (Better if you don’t!)

“Sir, I hope you won’t forget about us after you ascend to greatness...” (Don’t really care whether you remember us or not, we won’t be remembering you that much is for sure.)

ZiChuan Xiu was about to burst into tears, he spoke weepingly: “We have risked our lives together... We are brothers in adversity... How can I possibly forget you? Come, for our friendship, let’s toast! Yo, lady, bring another five bottles of Royal Brandy, and a Golden Roasted Lamb!”

...

By the time everyone had their fill and rubbed their bellies in satisfaction (Or pretend to be).

ZiChuan Xiu suddenly remembered something: “Oh, I almost forgot to tell you guys! There is official business as well.”

He retrieved an envelope from his briefcase: “Signed by Deputy Commander Luo Bo, this is your new assignment. Luo Jie, why don’t you take a look?”

Bai Chuan was getting a bad feeling about this, but quickly comforted herself: Surely it can't be worse than this, right?

Luo Jie took the envelope, but merely a glance of it... made this fearless warrior who wouldn't even flinch in the face of thousand demons, faint on the spot.

Chang Chuan snatched the envelope: "Useless coward, at worst it is an order to attack the Great Demon God Fortress, shame on you!"

As the words fell, he took a look at inside the envelope... and fainted as well.

Bai Chuan picked the Appointment Letter back up from the floor, hands trembling... ZiChuan Xiu eyed her sympathetically, suggesting: "Would you like some wine to calm the nerves?"

...

Bai Chuan mustered her courage and opened the envelope in one go, the order was surprisingly simple, just one sentence:

"Bannermaster Luo Jie, Bai Chuan and Chang Chuan are being redeployed to the Capital and will continue to serve under the command of Deputy Commander ZiChuan Xiu. – Far Eastern Army Chief of the General Staff Luo Bo, Imperial Calendar, Year 778"

Bai Chuan's mind went blank for a second... but she managed to hang on.

Her initial instinct was to reach for her sabre... but she didn't bring her weapon today.

She then thought to leap at him with the intent to kill... but she was unarmed.

She wanted to curse... but looking at ZiChuan Xiu's "honest" smile, she knew she would be wasting her breath.

Finally, she thought of an even deadlier manoeuvre.

...

Bai Chuan's sudden calm caught ZiChuan Xiu by surprise; he couldn't help but commend her: "No wonder they say women are more durable than men in the face of a crisis!"

ZiChuan Xiu: "Well, Bai Chuan, you see, it all worked out! We can all be

together again, no wonder those two fainted from joy...!

“Huh? Why aren’t you saying anything? What are you doing with Luo Jie’s coat... Why are you taking his wallet? And Chang Chuan’s wallet as well...”

“Is it possible that we both share the same hobby... we both like to get our friends drunk then steal their wallet? Surely that is not right. I’m still awake... unless you share it with me.”

“Why are you opening the window? It is quite cool inside...”

Bai Chuan stood next to the window, taking a deep breath and shouted: “Someone is doing an eat and run! Catch him!” With that, she leaped out of the window.

Suddenly voices stirred inside the Heaven’s Dream restaurant: “Who is doing an eat and run? Don’t let him get away!”

“Catch that guy, he is doing an eat and run! Over there, the one spacing out next to the window!”

“Stop right there, how dare you try to cheat us wearing Deputy Commander’s uniform and pretend to be an army officer?!”

“I knew he was a fake the moment I saw him... How can someone so young be a Deputy Commander?”

“Let’s beat him up before we take him to the police!”

...

According to House ZiChuan’s History Record: Imperial Calendar, Year 778 July 29th, with Far Eastern Army Deputy Commander Luo Bo’s approval, ZiChuan Xiu who was on reserve duty at the time, formed what would later be known as the bane of demons and the most powerful army in the world. The famous “Xiu’s Company”, its creation has been crucial in the history of House ZiChuan. In fact, this newly formed army is what made it possible for the new Headmaster of House ZiChuan to successfully inherit the House. It also played an important role in the quelling of civil unrests, defending against enemy attacks, subjugating the House Liu Feng and the conquering of the Great Demon God Fortress. It will greatly influence the course of House ZiChuan for the hundred years to come!

The three Bannermasters, Luo Jie, Bai Chuan and Chang Chuan were amongst the first officers to join Xiu's Company. That day at the Heaven's Dream restaurant in the City of Warren, they swore their fealty to ZiChuan Xiu. From that day forth, no matter in what kind of dire situation they found themselves in, none of them ever betrayed their vow and they remained loyal to ZiChuan Xiu, until the moment they died. It was also the first step ZiChuan Xiu took in becoming what would later be known as... the "King of Light".

# Purple River - Chapter 2

## Return to the Capital

“Di Du” was built in Imperial Calendar, Year 335 by the eleventh Emperor of the Empire of Light. It was originally intended to be a heavily fortified town for the purpose of denying the demons’ advance into the South Western Regions of the Empire. (Fort Warren wasn’t built yet at the time.) It was originally called Jia Shan Stronghold. In Imperial Calendar, Year 553, the Empire of Light’s last hold on the world of Western River had crumbled into pieces and ZiChuan Yun, the Garrison Commander of the South Western Regions of the Empire at the time, declared independence. He seized the opportunity and took control of Jia Shan Stronghold, renaming it to “Di Du”. Using it as his base of operations, he rapidly expanded his dominion over the surrounding regions and founded House ZiChuan. ZiChuan Yun became the first Headmaster of the House.

Ever since its founding year, Di Du had always been in the firm grasp of House ZiChuan. It didn’t matter whether it was the army of House Liu Feng or the furious demon horde, against the sturdy fortifications of the Imperial City and seven generations of ZiChuan soldiers’ sublime heroism and fierce resistance, none could bring the city to its knees. A string of glorious names were entwined with the history of this city: ZiChuan Yun, Sha Jia, ZiChuan Xing, Yun Shan He, Ka Miao... and later, ZiChuan Xiu. The Imperial Capital endured three hundred years of war, and is still standing.

After hundreds of years of war, House ZiChuan’s territory had vastly expanded and the Imperial Capital was no longer the frontline. It is now the biggest of the three capital city in the world of Western River, ahead of “Yuan Jing” of House

Liu Feng and “He Qiu” of House Lin. As the center of the world’s politics, economy, and culture, this prosperous city was the pride and crown jewel of House ZiChuan.

...

Someday in Imperial Calendar, Year 778 August, a group of riders arrived in Di Du after returning from the Far Eastern frontline. Its members included the recently promoted Deputy Commander – ZiChuan Xiu, Captain of the Guard – Gu Lei, the forty personal guards under his command, and another three “unlucky bastards”.

Bai Chuan: “Sir, when will you grace us with your benevolence and let us return to the Far East?”

Luo Jie: “Yes, come on. We have known each other for so long. You can just pretend doing us a favour. Serving under you... I mean I’m still a virgin; I’m not ready to die yet!”

Chang Chuan scolded Luo Jie: “Idiot! What are you saying, is that how you speak to your superior officer? Don’t you have manners?! You have to be polite and respectful when asking for favours!”

Chang Chuan turned towards ZiChuan Xiu, face in tears and snot: “Please Sir, in the name of my eighty year old mother and three year old child, please show us mercy!”

ZiChuan Xiu pled for his innocence: “Come now, you guys have been complaining the whole way, aren’t you tired? There is nothing I can do; the order for your redeployment is given by the Chief of the General Staff, Luo Bo.”

“Your eyes are betraying you... and that evil laughter... we know you are lying!”

“That is right. Luo Bo is clearly your accomplice!”

“I heard that you bought us from Luo Bo with mere two bottles of wine, such humiliation! At the very least, we are worth one bottle each!”

“The two bottles of wine was to cover the cost for your equipment... as for you, Luo Jie, you are worth the bottle cap at most!”

...

The party arrived at the Wagon Depot in Di Du.

“Yo, I’m back! Di Du, you’re as magnificent as I remembered!”

ZiChuan Xiu reminisced; six years ago, in order to protect the city, his younger self led an army for the first time, battling against the powerful army of House Liu Feng... A long time had passed since then. He couldn’t help but wonder how many citizens of Di Du still remember him?

“The past is like a dream!” ZiChuan Xiu bewailed passionately...

“Stop daydreaming! We are starving!”

“If you don’t provide us with food, we are going back to the Far East!”

“And we want an inn of the highest class!”

He didn’t need to look to know who it was.

...

After making accommodations for Gu Lei and the personal guards, ZiChuan Xiu and the three went out shopping. Coming from a place devastated by war to a bustling city like this, it didn’t matter where they looked, everything seemed interesting. Luo Jie grabbed hold of a young man on the street, asking: “Where can I find a restaurant?”

The young man eyed him up and down, considering his worn-out uncivilized look and his heavily accented Far Eastern speech. Then replied harshly in local slang: “Hicks!”, and ignored him.

Luo Jie didn’t understand, turning to ZiChuan Xiu: “Sir, what does Hicks mean?”

ZiChuan Xiu acted as if nothing out of the ordinary: “It is a word the town folk use to describe someone from the countryside, and usually not in a positive way.”

Luo Jie: “...I still don’t understand.”

ZiChuan Xiu sighed: “Do you at least remember what we used to call those barbarians in the villages near the frontline, the ones wearing only animal skins who never washed their faces and had only taken three showers in their entire

lives?” ...

Luo Jie eyes flared with anger: “I’m a bloody Banner Master, how dare he look down on me? I will teach him a lesson!”

Not even five minutes, Luo Jie came back looking down in defeat.

ZiChuan Xiu asked casually: “Well? Did you teach him a lesson?”

Luo Jie: “He taught me a lesson... He was a Red Banner Master.”

Chang Chuan strolled along looking around curiously: “People say that the girls in Di Du are all very bold and modern. Just look at what they are wearing, it has to be true. Wow! That one is hot!”

He approached a girl passing by, using his most charming gesture and most gentle voice: “Miss, do you believe in love at first sight? The moment I saw you, it was like an arrow through my heart...”

“Rapist! Help!” The young lady didn’t hear a word he said and ran away!

Chang Chuan dared not to meet the gaze of his comrades.

“I’m certain that every girl in this city has androphobia... there is simply no other plausible explanation!” Chang Chuan stated vehemently.

Bai Chuan: “We know, we know... they are all lesbians ok? The handsome, gentlemanly and extraordinary Lord Chang Chuan, can you please spare us? You said the same thing forty times already; even my ears are bleeding!”

Luo Jie: “Yo, another hottie over there... Unparalleled beauty and an aura of elegance... I give her a 9.8!”

Chang Chuan: “I give her a 9.9. An absolute goddess! Just a little bit too young.”

Frowning at the two jerks, Bai Chuan sniffed with disdain: “Look at yourselves; you are acting like you just came out of prison or something, complete lack of manners! Now take a good look at Commander Xiu, do you see how composed he is? He never even so much as mentioned...”

Without saying a word, ZiChuan Xiu rushed forward.

“Wow, he is in even more of a hurry than I expected... He couldn’t help it I



guess, holding back for six long years in the Far East. He is a bloody man after all!”

“Ha, look at him go! Suddenly approaching the young lady like that saying nothing at all except staring at her like a hawk... I foresee a slap coming!”

“Look, he is scaring the girl... even her face turned pale.”

“Indeed, she even dropped her bag in shock... Such a pitiful fellow, no woman in his life at all; no wonder he is always so eccentric! Bai Chuan, you should take better care of him in the future!”

“Why are they still staring at each other? It is time to cry for help!”

Whatever happened next made them doubt their eyes: The gorgeous noble lady leapt into ZiChuan Xiu’s arms in tears!

ZiChuan Xiu gently but firmly, held on to her shoulders and gazed into her watery eyes. He slowly dropped down to one knee and kissed her on the back of her hand.

Luo Jie watched in bewilderment: “He is proposing to her already?!”

Chang Chuan uttered regretfully: “If only I knew... I totally would have hit that... I see, so the girls in Di Du are indeed very open-minded!”

“Stop your rubbish!” The three was taken by surprise: He somehow overheard their whispers from dozen of meters away? Even though he barely raised his voice, they could hear him clearly as if he was right next to them.

ZiChuan Xiu’s voice was filled with the kind of sternness he had never shown before: “She is the only daughter of former Headmaster of the House – ZiChuan Yuan Xing, the niece of current Headmaster of the House – ZiChuan Shen Xing, and the first heir to the seat of the House – Lady ZiChuan Ning! Show your respect now!”

Luo Jie, Bai Chuan, Chang Chuan instantly dropped to their knees, bowing their head in respect.

## ZiChuan Ning

ZiChuan Ning's beauty was the otherworldly kind: elegant long hair, smooth and flawless jade-like oval shaped face, arching eyebrows in the shape of a moon, but her most alluring feature was her pair of bright eyes. Even though they were glistening with tears at the time, it did nothing to diminish her exquisiteness, and instead, it added another layer of heart-gripping charm.

She went up to ZiChuan Xiu; her refined posture was nothing short of perfection. Chang Chuan gazed in bewilderment, Luo Jie' drool trickled from the corner of his mouth and Bai Chuan was simply in a bad mood (Jealousy obviously).

ZiChuan Xiu exhaled under his breath: Only sixteen years old and already so elegant and alluring, how will the world resist her charm once she grows up?

ZiChuan Ning: "Brother, you came back!" She got a hold of herself, the complex and unspoken feelings she managed to convey with the few simple words made ZiChuan Xiu shudder to even contemplate.

ZiChuan Xiu smiled uncomfortably while replying in a respectful tone: "ZiChuan Xiu pays his respect to Lady Ning! Has my lady been well?"

ZiChuan Ning was dumbfounded, not expecting ZiChuan Xiu to answer her in such formal manner. She regarded him for a few seconds with her sparkling eyes before she adjusted her tone: "All is well! How has Deputy Commander Xiu been holding up? When did you return to Di Du?" Her voice lacked the joyfulness from before.

ZiChuan Xiu: "I arrived in Di Du earlier this morning; I haven't found the time to pay my lady a visit, I hereby express my deepest apologies."

"I see. Deputy Commander Xiu must have been weary from the journey!"

"My lady is too kind; it's my honour to serve the family."

ZiChuan Ning fell silent, not knowing what to say next. ZiChuan Xiu was the same. Everyone else, including the dull-brained Luo Jie could tell that ZiChuan Xiu had lost his usual EasyGoing and quick-wittedness... None of them would speak out and break the silence. It was their greatest pleasure to watch ZiChuan Xiu suffer!

Bai Chuan thought to herself: "Something is wrong with this pair of siblings..."

...

"So who are they?" ZiChuan Ning[1] only just realized there were others with him.

"They are my fellow Far Eastern Army companions, and like me, they have also been reassigned to the Capital. Come, introduce yourselves to Her Ladyship."

Holding his head up high, Luo Jie introduced himself: "My name is Luo Jie, Luo Yan Ge[2], born in Sha Jia, rank Far Eastern Army Banner Master. I'm young, hardworking, capable and have good prospects. Currently 24 years old, single, and in search of a kind, virtuous and understanding single lady... Ouch!"

Both Chang Chuan and Bai Chuan retracted their fists without even looking his way, as though the vicious blows had nothing to do with them.

Chang Chuan gave her a handsome salute: "Chang Chuan, De Li An, rank Far Eastern Army Banner Master, currently serving under the command of Commander Xiu. I'm honored to have this opportunity to meet my lady, please allow me to pay you my respect!"

Chang Chuan saluted: "Bai Chuan, Jia Na Ming, Born in Northern Sea, currently serving under the command of Commander Xiu, rank Banner Master."

"Woah." ZiChuan Ning didn't seem to care about Luo Jie and Chang Chuan, but was very interested in Chang Chuan: "Sister, you are so young and already hold the rank of Banner Master. I'm impressed, and besides, you are very pretty as well..."

Bai Chuan bowed tactfully: "It is all thanks to Commander Xiu's guidance!"

"So where is Sister Bai Chuan going to stay in Di Du?"

"I just arrived and haven't settled in yet. We will most likely stay at the

barrack.”

“Barrack is no good; it is old and dirty... Why don’t you stay at my place?”

“But...” Bai Chuan looked towards ZiChuan Xiu. He coughed slightly: “I don’t think it is a good idea, there are forty of us...”

“My home is very spacious... More are welcome, I love having a crowd!”

While ZiChuan Xiu tried to come up with another excuse, Luo Jie had already lost his patience: “Since my lady insisted on having us, why don’t we just do as she says?”

“That is right.” Chang Chuan couldn’t wait either: Former Headmaster’s home, it has to be lavish and magnificent, besides, we will have the company of a beautiful lady... who wants to stay at the barrack must be an idiot! “She is very sincere!”

ZiChuan Xiu nodded grudgingly, thinking: I have to move out the moment I find another place, declining her now will only embarrass her. “Then we will have to trouble my lady!”

ZiChuan Ning joyously scowled at him, as if she was blaming him for calling her my lady. That kind of indescribable amorous flirtation made a battle hardened warrior like ZiChuan Xiu’s heart skip a beat.

...

Bai Chuan waited till the others had left before whispering to ZiChuan Xiu: “Sir, I assume Her Ladyship is not your sister by blood, right?”

ZiChuan Xiu nodded bitterly: “She is ZiChuan Yuan Xing’s only daughter, I’m Sir Yuan Xing adopted orphan... Without him, both I and my mother would have starved to death, and thanks to him my mother could live out her days in peace...”

Bai Chuan felt touched: She didn’t expect someone like him who seemed so care-free all the time, would have such a sad past...

...

“How did you know?”

“Well, from the genetic point of view, it was pretty obvious... Lady Ning is like a living Goddess, while you, Sir on the other hand...”

## Personal Affairs

ZiChuan Xiu was flabbergasted when he saw ZiChuan Ning's ride! "Huh, this... this is...!"

ZiChuan Ning: "Oh, it is called an automobile... or more correctly, a car! Mercedes-Benz, made in Germany, original parts, powerful engine, rides super smooth, the commercials claim not a single drop of water would spill from a full glass of water even when going at the speed of hundred twenty miles per hour..."

"That is not what I meant... why is someone driving a Mercedes in the era of horses and swords? Surely this is not the time or place, readers will complain."

"Pretty lady needs her expensive car, author likes it that way! If the readers complain... just threaten them with no update for a month! That will shut them up!"

...

Inside the ride, ZiChuan Xiu admired the feasting and revelry of the prosperous city, a total opposite of the Far Eastern Regions. He deplored to himself: "This is what we risked our lives for, to protect this place of peace and happiness."

Luo Jie and the rest followed closely behind while he and ZiChuan Ning drove in the car.

ZiChuan Ning: "So many years, how have you been?"

ZiChuan Xiu Sighed under his breath: "Six years, other children of his age enjoyed their care-free and cheerful childhood, while he had to endure the numbing pain and sorrow of the battlefield. He had to watch his closest comrade being torn apart and eaten alive by the demons; their horrifying screams constantly haunted his nights. The time he had to escape Demon's pursuit, he had to hide neck deep in the muddy quagmire for a whole day and night, not

daring to move even an inch. And the time he had to cannibalize the dead in order to survive when he was trapped without food or weapon; not to mention the unbearable pain that kept him awake in the night from the dozens of times he was wounded... How do you even begin to convey this kind of suffering to a little girl whose biggest worry in life was having a pimple on her face?

ZiChuan Xiu nodded, speaking coldly: "It is ok, just the food was terrible."

Let's talk about something else: "How is the situation over here?"

"Great, under the leadership of Supreme Commander Yang Ming Hua, we are racing towards hell at full speed."

"Oh? What happened?"

"His lust of grandeur; he launched three invasions against the House Liu Feng, and Liu Feng Shuang kicked the crap out of him every time. When the Council of Elders asked for his explanation, he shamelessly gave a speech saying that loyalty was his only fault..."

ZiChuan Ning mimicked Yang Ming Hua's voice: "We must destroy the House Liu Feng at all cost... If that was a mistake, then I will gladly make that mistake. I will not deny it, nor regret it!" And thus it was enough to fool the Council of Elders, and they let him go."

ZiChuan Xiu wasn't surprised: "A bold speech. Without the first part, I almost thought it was some confession from a girl who is having an affair with a married man."

ZiChuan Ning laughed so hard she almost drove into someone.

...

Our Supreme Commander sure is brave and crafty... What about the House Liu Feng? If we kept losing, why didn't they come and pay us a visit? It's not Liu Feng Shuang's style."

"You must have been out of the loop. Liu Feng Xi Shan has fallen gravely ill. His three sons are busy fighting for the seat of the House. Liu Feng Shuang is his daughter; she is not in the line of succession, but they are all wary of her. So they sent her far away from where the decisions are being made, all the way to Fort Xi

Bing. She is now a Commander on the frontline.”

“That was ill considerate of Supreme commander... Why was he trying to interrupt them when House Liu Feng was about to make a grave mistake? If he wanted to destroy House Liu Feng he could easily waited till they are done fighting themselves then pay them a visit.”

“Not at all! Our Supreme Commander has no intention to destroy the House Liu Feng. In contrary, he couldn’t be happier for having an enemy like Liu Feng Shuang!”

“Why is that?”

“Before that, if he wanted to have someone removed, he had to at least come up with a valid excuse, like corruption, negligence or something of the sort... But now he just needs to give them a pep talk: “Go attack Fort Xi Bing!” And that unlucky bastard is done for. No one has ever managed to come out ahead against Liu Feng Shuang. For the past half year, the Commander position of the Border Army has been changing faster than the facet on a revolving lamp. All of them were demoted after losing to Liu Feng Shuang, and all of them were the ones Yang Ming Hua had problems with... So you tell me, does he not love Liu Feng Shuang to death or what?”

“Then... Is Stirling all right? He is definitely against him.”

“Yang Ming Hua can’t wait to let Stirling “talk” to Liu Feng Shuang, and have him battle it out with her, face to face. I heard they even met during the second invasion, but before the battle was decided, due to Uncle ZiChuan Shen Xing’s protest, Stirling was reassigned to the Imperial Guard Army as Deputy Commander. So he never had the chance.”

ZiChuan Xiu thought to himself: Everyone kept saying what a fool ZiChuan Shen Xing was, but that decision was very wise.

...

“Then your Uncle... His Excellency, does he not care what Yang Ming Hua is doing?”

“He has bloody Alzheimer... I think so anyway!” Annoyance flared inside her at the mention of her Uncle: “I told him several times to watch out for Yang Ming



Hua, but before the day had even passed, he already...”

ZiChuan Ning spoke using ZiChuan Shen Xing’s feeble mannerisms: “About that, leave them to Yang Ming Hua. Eh? What did you say? I can’t hear you, speak louder... Oh, I don’t feel so well today. I’m getting too old for this, I should retire soon!”

Her vivid imitation brought forth much laughter from ZiChuan Xiu. But he knew things were much more complicated than ZiChuan Ning had thought. He could still recall the vigorous new Headmaster, ZiChuan Shen Xing from six years ago. There was no way someone like that could turn into a useless coward in the short span of a few years.

“You should stop saying things like that to him from now on.” It didn’t matter whether ZiChuan Shen Xing was really a fool or it was merely an act, ZiChuan Ning would get in trouble if Yang Ming Hua got wind of this.

“Sure!” ZiChuan Ning nodded meekly while speaking in an even softer voice: “I’m glad you are back, now I can just leave everything to you!”

Sudden wave of emotion came over ZiChuan Xiu: ZiChuan Ning was only sixteen years old, yet she had already demonstrated a sense of matureness not often found for someone her age... Clearly, growing up alone in a place surrounded by enemies had to have taken a heavy toll on her. He spoke softly as well: “You can count on me.”

In that moment, both of them were silent... and an aura of tenderness filled the air. They no longer tried to stay aloof.

...

“Oh right, almost forgot to ask you something important!” ZiChuan Xiu suddenly remembered: “You’re only sixteen, how did you get the driving license?”

“Driving license? Well, the author says he doesn’t believe in that kind of stuff. So in our book, there is no such thing.”

“...So you are driving without license?! Stop the car; I want to get out right now! I’m not ready to die just yet!”

“Don’t be hasty, let me find the break... where did it go I wonder? Is it this one?” ZiChuan Ning pulled...

“It is going even faster! That was the acceleration... HELP, you really don’t know how to drive!”

“That doesn’t make sense! I obviously can drive... surely the bloody author knows a car needs to have breaks, right?”

## Deep Feelings

“Woah! What a lavish mansion! Awesome!” Seeing ZiChuan Ning’s manor villa with garden and pools, Luo Jie sighed in resignation: “With my salary, I won’t be able to afford this even if I stop eating and drinking for thirty thousand years.”

Chang Chuan turned to ZiChuan Xiu: “Sir, does your sister have a boyfriend? Would you mind hooking us up? I have followed you into battle for so many years... Ouch, why did you hit me, Luo Jie?”

Luo Ji: “Sir, hook me up instead... Sir, you mustn’t trust him, he talks bad things about you behind your back all the time... Only I have always stayed true and loyal to you, Sir!”

“Horseshit! You are always saying bad things about him. Like last time when we were still in the Far East, weren’t you the one saying Master Xiu thinks through his arse? I scolded and corrected you right on the spot!”

“No you didn’t. You said that “It is because his head was stuck in his arse.” You even laughed hysterically... Sir, you mustn’t believe his lies!”

“Please, Sir, if you introduce Lady Ning to the perverted douchebag Luo Jie over here, it will be a nightmare...”

“Chang Chuan is a womanizer... Sir, I’m telling you: “The few nights we stayed in Sha Jia, he was gone every night. You would only see him the next morning, barely able to stand, as if he just went through several Battles of Heng Chuan. Even his shirt was covered in lipsticks... Chang Chuan, confess now. Where were you?”

“I went to take care of the lost young ladies; I wanted to show them that there was still true love in this world... I wished to make the world a better place... Sir, now that it comes to this, I may as well tell you: Luo Jie is a pervert. He often goes to the female barracks to peep on them... You know their underwear that often went missing... Just search Luo Jie’s backpack and you will know. They are

all there, every single one! If you really let Her Ladyship be with someone like him... can she really be happy?"

"It is just a regular and normal hobby... In my opinion it is not that much different from collecting stamps really... I can provide happiness to Her Ladyship just fine! Sir, please listen to me, I know Chang Chuan's darkest secret... Sir, hold on."

"Sir, where are you going? I haven't told you about the shit Luo Jie has done yet, he..."

...

Compared to six years ago, the manor hadn't changed much. ZiChuan Xiu walked towards the old oak tree, surveying the strange yet familiar manor along the way. The knife mark could still clearly be seen. Everything was exactly the same as it had been before he left six years ago, only people changed... In that moment, ZiChuan Xiu felt it deeply: One does not mature from the passing of time, but experience. He had already crossed the stage of youth. From a boy, he had become a man, or even an old man.

He stepped into the room and the servant respectfully welcomed him: "Young master, you have returned!"

ZiChuan Xiu gave him a friendly nod, but sneered at the thought: "Tch, nothing has changed, even the way I'm addressed."

As he entered the room where he lived as a child, he was stunned: It was exactly the same as it had been six years ago! Books, bedding and even pillow cover, everything was the same. He sat down in front of his desk, reaching out with his right hand with a customary movement, and a block of ink appeared in his hand... even the positioning stayed the same!

Has no one been to his room before? ZiChuan Xiu wiped his hand over the table, found no sign of dusts. Clearly someone had been cleaning the room on a regular basis. He was confused...

"Everything was the same, right?" Not sure when or how, ZiChuan Ning had already appeared at the door.

"Not even a speck of dust." ZiChuan Xiu spoke casually: "How did my lady

manage such a feat?”

“I have forbidden anyone from entering this room. I would clean it once a week myself, then put everything back the way it was before.” ZiChuan Ning tilted her head slightly; her beauty was beyond words: “But I really can’t stand that pair of smelly sneakers anymore; even though I wash my hand eight times every time I touch it, I can’t get rid of its smell!”

ZiChuan Ning’s word came easily, but ZiChuan Xiu felt the weight in his heart: How can I possibly repay her feelings...

He instinctively tried to avoid that conversation, seeking for an excuse...

“Lady, I...”

“Your stomach is acting up again and you want to go to the bathroom? Your stomach always does that when things get heavy... I can tell from your eyes... Six years, you are still using the same excuse; it is getting old!”

ZiChuan Xiu’s new revelation came as a disappointment: ZiChuan Yuan Xing’s ability to see people for what they really are has not only survived, but flourished in his daughter, ZiChuan Ning.

...

“Lady Ning, you have misunderstood. There is nothing wrong with my stomach... just that my head really hurts. Ouch... I must have caught a cold! I have to lie down for a bit...”

“Tch!” ZiChuan Ning walked out of the door: “I knew you would do that! Useless... Right, I have confiscated all the porn magazines under your bed! If you want new ones, there is a bookstore across the street. The owner usually hides them; just tell him that I sent you... I’m one of his regulars... He has all the latest editions.”

ZiChuan Xiu’s headache suddenly got worse... much worse.

# High Command

House ZiChuan's highest commanding structure is divided into two levels and four departments. The first level includes the House of Headmaster (who has the highest authority in the family), and the Council of Elders (which is formed by representatives chosen by the public from every province).

The second level includes the High Command (led by the Supreme Commander and the six Commanders under his command, its mostly responsible for the implementation of specific administrative affairs.), and the Ministry of Supervision (The Chief of Supervision also holds the title of a Commander, but he is ranked higher than the other six Commanders and lower than the Supreme Commander. However, the Ministry is not under the jurisdiction of the High Command. It is mainly responsible for supervising the other executive offices, and reports directly to the Headmaster).

Officially, members of High Command are appointed by the Headmaster (with the Council of Elder's approval) and are under the direct command of Headmaster and the Council of Elders. In essence, the Supreme Commander is just a high-ranking official serving in the House of Headmaster. But in reality (due to the current Headmaster ZiChuan Shen Xing's incompetence and Supreme Commander Yang Ming Hua's wild ambitions), the real power of the House has gradually fallen into the hands of the High Command. Therefore, when high-ranking officers like ZiChuan Xiu return to the Capital, the first place they must visit is the High Command and not the House of Headmaster.

...

The guard on duty replied in a polite but aloof manner: "Supreme Commander Yang Ming Hua is very busy. If a newly appointed Deputy Commander wishes to see him, you better make an appointment several days ahead of time."

"I understand." ZiChuan Xiu said: "So can I make an appointment now?"

The guard browsed through his registration list: "Supreme Commander's schedule is full until next Monday. Can you come by at three o'clock that afternoon? Supreme Commander has about five minutes for you."

"Great!" ZiChuan Xiu smiled. He wasn't really in a hurry and this way, he could get a few more days off.

...

Just then, a middle-aged high-ranking officer walked past the hall. Upon seeing ZiChuan Xiu, he halted his steps.

"Hey, isn't that Ah Xiu? You're back?"

ZiChuan Xiu nodded and saluted politely: "Sir Fang, how have you been? It has been a long time!"

Fang Jin was the Black Banner Army Commander, and was also his childhood strategy teacher. Later on the two had fought side by side during the counterattack against House Liu Feng; they were well acquainted. ZiChuan Xiu was glad to be able to see a familiar face in a place ridden with hostility like the High Command.

"Terrible! My best disciple didn't even come to see me after he got back. How well could I be?"

ZiChuan Xiu could feel the warmth swirling in his chest. Fang Jin knew all too well how much Supreme Commander Yang Ming Hua distrusted him, and yet he still came to talk in the open. Even during this dangerous time when Yang Ming Hua was ruling supreme, he could still meet someone who cared for him. It was rare.

"I only came back to Di Du yesterday. My plan for today was to report to the High Command first before I came to see you, but it just happens that—"

"Fine, there is no need to explain!" Fang Jin wrapped his arm around ZiChuan Xiu's shoulder. "Well? Do you have a place to stay yet? How about my place? My two stupid girls just happen to be at that age as well. They are always horny thinking about boys every day. How about I bring you home to them as a gift?" He sized ZiChuan Xiu's well-built body up and down before complimenting, "You have turned out to be quite handsome indeed! Are you interested in becoming

my son-in-law? You may choose either one of my girls...”

“Sir.” ZiChuan Xiu interrupted abruptly. “I’m already staying at Lady Ning’s place.”

“Oh!” Fang Jin cracked a smile: “No wonder...compared to Lady Ning, my two stupid girls are no match at all... Not bad, I approve of your choice!”

ZiChuan Xiu didn’t know if he should laugh or cry.

...

“The High Command is scheduled to be in a conference today, what are you doing here?”

“Oh, I just came back yesterday. I wanted to report in, but I was told that I needed an appointment in order to see the Supreme Commander...”

“I see...” Fang Jin took ZiChuan Xiu by his arm: “I will get you in!”

ZiChuan Xiu hesitated: “But if the High Command is in conference, with my stature...”

“What are you afraid of?! I have your back!” Fang Jin pushed and dragged ZiChuan Xiu into the conference room.

The conference had yet to start, so only a few people sat loosely across the long table.

...

“Come, let me introduce them to you!” Fang Jin pushed ZiChuan Xiu forward: “This one is the Border Army Commander – Ming Hui, my old partner!”

Ming Hui looked nothing like Fang Jin. He was well educated, tidily dressed, suave, and wore a pair of golden laced glasses like a well accomplished scholar. He politely shook ZiChuan Xiu’s hand: “Defeating eighty thousand demon forces with an army of thirty thousand during the Campaign of Heng Chuan was very impressive, Deputy Commander Xiu!”

“It was nothing. Your fame on the other hand is spread far and wide. I admire it wholeheartedly.” Not everything ZiChuan Xiu said was out of courtesy: Despite Ming Hui’s meekly and scholarly look, his forces had always been the ones to



lead the charge during the recent invasions against House Liu Feng (And he was always the one charging ahead of everyone else). His unit was the first one to breach House Liu Feng's Fortress – Lan Ling. But then the terrifying Liu Feng Shuang appeared, and he was the first one to run as well. In fact, he ran so fast that Liu Feng Shuang even praised his unit. "When you first saw them, you thought you could cut them down with your sabres; but when you reached for your sabres, you thought you needed spears; and when you grabbed your spears they had already gotten so far that you needed bows and arrows; by the time you readied your bows and arrows, they were already at a distance you could only hit with cannons!" Recently, almost every officer in the Border Army had suffered losses at the hand of Liu Feng Shuang, except Ming Hui. That was the reason behind his promotion to the Border Army Commander a month ago.

"And this one is Commander Lei Xun, the Central Army Commander, also known as the "Number One Fighter" of House ZiChuan!" When Fang Jin used the words "Number One Fighter," his tone was filled with sarcasm.

ZiChuan Xiu knew him to be Yang Ming Hua's most trusted confidant. His "Divine Arts of Wind and Thunder" had won him the title of "Number One Fighter" for five years straight in the annual martial competition of House ZiChuan. There was also another thing that he was known for. Before the final match of every competition, something would always happen to his opponent. They would either get diarrhea, get into a car accident, have family emergencies, or even get beat up by thugs in some dark street corner. All of them resulted in his opponent forfeiting the fight.

He faked a smile as he shook ZiChuan Xiu's hand: "Not bad for a kid, so young and already a Deputy Commander." Secretly, he channelled his "Divine Art of Wind and Thunder," purposely trying to humiliate ZiChuan Xiu by forcing him to scream in pain or to cripple his hand completely.

Standing next to him, Fang Jin could feel something was wrong. Just as he was about to intervene, ZiChuan Xiu spoke concisely: "Thank you for your guidance, Sir!" He then retracted his hand effortlessly as if nothing had happened.

...

"This one is Commander Luo Ming Hai, Chief of Staff at the High Command."

Luo Ming Hai always kept a straight, cold, and emotionless face. It was almost as if everyone in the whole world owed him two hundred dollars or something. He was also a close confidant of Yang Ming Hua.

ZiChuan Xiu was planning to shake his hand, but seeing how little interest the man had showed him, he hesitated and decided to introduce himself instead: “ZiChuan Xiu at your service, Sir.”

Luo Ming Hai kept his icy cold expression, and took his time before he hummed through his nose: “Hmm!” He didn’t show any more interest.

“Just ignore him; he is always like that, no matter who he talks to.” Fang Jin spoke without reservation, disregarding Luo Ming Hai who sat right next to him.

Strangely, Luo Ming Hai did not get mad and just made another deep hum through his nose: “Tch!”

Next up, he was introduced to the Imperial Guard Army Commander – Pi Gu, an eighty year old elder. His age had long robbed him of his senses. When ZiChuan Xiu greeted him, he had to repeat himself three times before he got through to him: “Oh, right... so you are ZiChuan Xiu? So young... I’m Pi Gu.”

Everyone else had to try their very best to not burst into laughter. His accent was so blurry that the way he said “Pi Gu” sounded almost like “PiGu”[1]!

ZiChuan Xiu thought of the worst: Yang Ming Hua chose such an idiot as the Imperial Guard Commander; was he paving the way for his future coup?

...

“And this one is like you. He just came back from the Far East, Commander Ge Ying Xing. You should know him right?”

It was the first time ZiChuan Xiu met Ge Ying Xing. He was instantly intrigued by his unique features.

He was quite handsome, and had definitely been a pretty boy when he was younger. His soft and already slightly yellowish hair draped disorderly over his forehead while his two curved and thin eyebrows made him appear incredibly gentle. It was obvious he had been ill. Even though it was the hot summer in August, his face was as pale as paper, and his body was wrapped tightly in the

thick army coat meant for the winter, exposing only his shaking head. The struggle with his illness had robbed the last bit of his life but his eyes were still as clear as the stars, filled with a deep wisdom and tiredness as though he had long seen through everything the world had to offer. When he looked upon ZiChuan Xiu, his eyes were so incredibly warm and caring. What kind of eyes were those? ZiChuan Xiu was stunned. Only then did he realize that a man's eyes could be like that; so indescribably beautiful.

It was the first time ZiChuan Xiu saw someone so charismatic like that.

A wave of respect surged forward inside ZiChuan Xiu: This patient on the verge of death was the only pillar holding the entire Far East and the wall shielding against the ferocious Demon invasions.

It was thanks to this patient, who carried the House on his shoulders, that the ambitious and overbearing Yang Ming Hua had been kept at bay for the last six years.

Without this patient's shelter and protection, ZiChuan Xiu would have been killed by Yang Ming Hua before he could come of age...

Painful feelings bubbled up inside ZiChuan Xiu's heart: Ge Ying Xing looked so lonely and vulnerable.

The two shared a look, and Ge Ying Xing revealed a slight smile: "Luo Bo told me about you." His voice was as heavy and magnetic as he was: "Do your best while you are here; live up to the name of the Far Eastern Army, understand?"

He spoke in a rigid way a superior would when addressing a subordinate, yet it sounded very natural to him. Many unsaid things were conveyed through the pair of magical eyes: We are on the same side, be careful!

ZiChuan Xiu felt inexplicably moved by his words, like a lost child finding his father. He bowed deeply: "Yes, Sir!"

The two men understood each other; there was no need for words.

...

"Yo, Ge Ying Xing." Fang Jin nonchalantly patted his shoulder: "What happened to you? What did you do to look like a dead man?"

Ge Ying Xing smiled slightly: “The journey has taken its toll; I’m not feeling too well.”

Fang Jin: “No shit! Those who know you would praise you for your diligence and dedication, but those who don’t will have to wonder: Didn’t everyone say the girls in the Far East were all dark skinned dwarfs? How come our Commander Ge Ying Xing didn’t seem to mind, and still worked so hard every night?”

He spoke with concern. “Buddy, take it easy alright? Even if your body can handle it, seeing a Commander of the House ZiChuan like this on the street... it may tarnish the family honour!”

Everyone laughed in unison, except Luo Ming Hai who smirked, showing that he was laughing in his own way. Ge Ying Xing scowled while laughing: “Jerk!”

...

The door opened soundlessly and the guard shouted: “The Supreme Commander has arrived!”

Everyone stood up, waiting in anticipation.

# Conference

Yang Ming Hua was a rather handsome man.

With an upright and dignified look, a sense of righteousness in his eyes, and mastery in the rippling inner force technique, he still looked like a man in his thirties, despite being over fifty years old. So naturally, he had an air of elegance about him. His pair of very bright eyes was filled with care and love. When this was combined with his respectable and amiable smile, he looked like a reliable and righteous elder in every way.

ZiChuan Xiu smiled slightly, recalling the appraisal ZiChuan Ning gave Yang Ming Hua: “He was so despicable that you couldn’t even entrust him with your toothbrush!”

Yang Ming Hua waved his hand, merely acknowledging everyone’s presence, except ZiChuan Xiu’s. He approached him directly, smiling, and like an old friend he patted his shoulder saying: “Our handsome lad is back!” He looked him up and down, smiling: “Not bad, I hope Luo Bo didn’t let you starve? When did you come back? You should have told me and I would have given you a warm welcome!” His enthusiasm could rival that of a caring father or brother.

ZiChuan Xiu saluted: “I came back yesterday and today I’m here to see you, Sir. I didn’t intend to intrude while the High Command is in conference. I sincerely apologize. Please allow me to excuse myself.”

“Well, now that you are here, you may as well sit down and listen in!” Yang Ming Hua replied bluntly: “You are a Deputy Commander now; it is only a matter of time before you have to join us at the High Command!”

“You would kill me first before you let me into the High Command!” ZiChuan Xiu was not blinded by his ardor, acting flattered: “You are too kind, Sir. I’m not worthy of such praise. The rank of Commander is the highest of honors bestowed upon a soldier of ZiChuan, the perfect combination of the three

virtues, benevolence, wisdom, and courage. How could a lowborn like me hope to reach such important position?”

“Hahaha.” Yang Ming Hua was delighted; it looked like ZiChuan Xiu’s flatteries managed to hit the mark: “Come, sit down!”

Though ZiChuan Xiu wouldn’t dare to sit at the table, he grabbed a chair and sat against the wall instead, while keeping his mouth shut.

...

The first topic to be discussed during the conference was raised by Commander Ming Hui – How to handle the conflicts at the border with House Liu Feng.

But the discussion was actually just Yang Ming Hua’s soliloquy. All the other commanders simply chose to abstain from voicing their opinion. Commander Ge Ying Xing even closed his eyes, napping. But he was sick, so nobody blamed him.

The next topic was rather trivial. Black Banner Army Commander Fang Jing questioned the Chief of Staff Luo Ming Hai on the issues plaguing the Black Banner Army, like unpaid wages, bad food, lack of vegetables, *etc.*

Luo Ming Hai replied nonchalantly: “I have already filed an inquiry to the logistic department.” Despite Fang Jing’s fierce protests, that was the only reply he gave.

Central Army Commander Lei Xun demanded that the Central Army should have the priority this year in choosing graduated officers from the Far Eastern Army Academy. His reason was that the quality of Central Army was worse than the other armies. But his suggestion was quickly and vigorously refuted by Fang Jing and Ming Hui.

Fang Jing raised his voice: “The lack of quality in an army is the result of having idiotic commanders!” That was just short of accusing Lei Xun straight to his face.

Ming Hui calmly elaborated on his reasoning: “Border Army is the front line against House Liu Feng. There is simply no reason to not give us the best qualified officers!”

The discussion quickly escalated to a shouting match, and in the end it was

Yang Ming Hua who put an end to it by voicing his support for Lei Xun.

Throughout the entire debacle, Luo Ming Hei didn't say a word and Ge Ying Xing didn't open his eyes. No one knew if he was really asleep. Pi Gu was so far gone that he started drooling.

Afterwards, a few more topics were discussed, and for quite a few times, Yang Ming Hua had asked ZiChuan Xiu: "Ah Xiu, what is your opinion on this matter? Tell us."

Every time, ZiChuan Xiu would firmly reply: "Thank you Sir, for allowing me to participate, and bear witness to the wisdom and greatness of our commanders. How could I dare blemish their calculated foresights with my ill-educated opinion? It would be an atrocity!"

ZiChuan Xiu knew very well that given his current inappropriate position, no matter what he said, right or wrong, it would be wrong! All Yang Ming Hua needed to do then would be to accuse him of "obstructing military operations", and he would be done for!

Ge Ying Xing, whom everyone thought was sound asleep, peeked at him and smirked in approval.

...

"I've got a question." Ge Ying Xing finally spoke in a drooping fashion after everyone else was done talking: "During the Campaign of Heng Chuan, Deputy Commander Xiu captured over ten thousand Demon soldiers, including the third Princess of Demons, Ka Dan. She has already been escorted to Di Du. As to what we should do with her, I leave that to the Supreme Commander."

Yang Ming Hua: "What do we usually do with the Demon captives?"

Ge Ying Xing replied: "We usually send them to the Wagela work camp as laborers. We sometimes let the captor keep the goblins and dwarves as a reward or sell them at the slave market."

"But this girl is different. So far, she is the most important POW we have, and she is royalty. If we deal with her like we usually do... It may cause repercussions..."

Ge Ying Xing didn't specify, but everyone knew what the repercussion entailed. When the Great Demon God King found out that his daughter was sold to the slave market, he would come with several millions of Demon forces at his back... No one liked the thought of that.

Fang Jing spoke in a serious tone: "So what, we just give him his daughter back on a silver platter, and say – Your Majesty the Great Demon God King, here, this is your daughter in pristine condition, even her hymen is still intact. Please check if everything is in order, and don't let her run off next time. There are many bad guys out there; it was fortunate that we found her first and not them!"

Laughter erupted from inside the room and even Yang Ming Hua had a hard time catching his breath. He pointed at Fang Jing: "You... you are the number one troublemaker here in the High Command!"

"It is definitely a delicate matter. If we just hand her over, we will have tarnished the family honour, because everyone will think we are scared of the demons. But if we keep her, we may cause problems for later..." Border Army Commander Ming Hui lowered his head, deep in thought.

ZiChuan Xiu's head started to hurt. When he first captured Ka Dan, he thought it had been a great accomplishment. But as it turned out... he seemed to have brought more problems for the High Command than it was worth.

...

Yang Ming Hua asked: "Did we get anything useful from her? How is she, anyways?"

Ge Ying Xing smiled wryly: "She didn't tell us anything... and without permission, we didn't dare torture her. Every day she just ate, drank, and slept. She only eats things like sparrow liver, agave root, and bird's nest; she drinks only three hundred year old honeydew and morning rain water after being filtered seventeen times... And she sleeps in a way even more demanding. We had to hunt over three hundred peacocks and pluck out their feathers to make her bed. When she sleeps, there can't be any noises within fifty meter of radius. If we fail to comply with any of her demands, she will commit suicide. In fact, she has already tried twice. One of the guards died from a heart attack because of it."



“By now I don’t hope for anything, as long as the Demon God King is willing to take his daughter back; I would even pay him a year of my salary!”

A wave of laughter later, Ming Hui spoke: “Perhaps the Great Demon King let us capture her on purpose, because he couldn’t stand her anymore and wanted to get rid of her.”

Fang Jing: “Surely we can’t give her up for free? How about this, why don’t we use her as leverage and initiate a peace talk with the Great Demon God King? The truth is, if we wish to exert our dominion over the great plains of Western River, our foremost enemy is the House Liu Feng. Fighting against the Demons drains our resources greatly.”

Lei Xun: “Great idea! Why don’t we send you to talk to the Great Demon God King?”

“You asswipe! I knew you would say that, why don’t you go?” Everyone in the room was amongst the best fighters of House ZiChuan, but neither the courageous Fang Jing nor the braggart Lei Xun would dare volunteer to meet with the invincible Great Demon God King.

“I have a suggestion.” No one knew when the feeble Pi Gu had woken up from his slumber, but he spoke, trembling: “Why don’t we select a few from the demon captives and let them deliver the news to the Demon God King?”

“Good idea! Wisdom does come with age!” Yang Ming Hua cheered in approval, and everyone else did the same.

Only Ge Ying Xing opposed the idea: “Tomorrow, I’m going back to the Far East. All the negotiations for peace will take at least half a year. I can’t just sit here and wait! Someone else will have to watch over Ka Dan.”

ZiChuan Xiu suddenly got a bad feeling about all of this...

...

Of course, everyone, including Ge Ying Xing, then fixated their gaze on him.

“I’m not ready to die yet!” ZiChuan Xiu resented the idea, teeth chattering. He hurriedly declined: “I don’t think this is a good idea! I just came back to Di Du; I don’t even have a place to call my own. I’m not suited for this task.”

“Aren’t you staying at Lady Ning’s place?” Yang Ming Hua’s smile was gentle and kind: “Let Ka Dan stay there as well; it will be a place worthy of her royal stature!”

Everyone echoed their approval in unison. Fang Jing even winked at Ming Hua: “I’m so jealous of his position!”

Ming Hui laughed evilly in kind: “Indeed. I heard that girl is super hot!” In that instant, he didn’t look like a prestigious Commander of the three hundred thousand soldiers of the Border Army. He sighed: “Why do I never get easy tasks like that?”

“Commander Fang.” ZiChuan Xiu wanted to bite him: “If you like it so much, I’m more than willing to let you have her!”

“I can’t do that, man! I have an angry lioness at home!”

...

Ge Ying Xing spoke, smiling as well: “Ah Xiu, since it was you who captured her, it is only fitting that you should be the one to guard her. A man has to wipe his own ass!” Clearly, his biggest concern at the time was finding a scapegoat... He didn’t care if ZiChuan Xiu was even on his side!

ZiChuan Xiu stared at him bitterly, but Ge Ying Xing pretended to not have noticed. Pulling his head back inside his cotton coat, he was once again that sickly person on the verge of the death.

“Very well, as the Supreme Commander, I hereby approve of this suggestion!” Yang Ming Hua smiled: “It is an order!”

“But Sir...” ZiChuan Xiu wanted to cry, but he didn’t utter another sound... Once the order was given, disobeying it would be a serious offence.

“Don’t be the guard and the thief at the same time!” Lei Xun hinted at the underlying malicious intent.

“It is ok if you do!” Fang Jing seemed to have forgotten about his dispute with Lei Xun earlier:

“Who knows, perhaps you can become Demon God King’s son-in-law, and the war will be over in an instant!”

“That’s right. For the greater good of House ZiChuan, Ah Xiu, give her your best!” Ming Hui burst into laughter.

Soon the entire room was filled with a sneaky sound of laughter typical from a bunch of good-for-nothing boys. It made ZiChuan Xiu wonder if he was in a private room at the local brothel and not the conference room of the High Command...

Suddenly, the door opened soundlessly and an icy cold voice pierced through: “ZiChuan Xiu, are you still alive?” The voice permeated bone-wrenching hatred and killing-intent...

# Duel

Who dared to offend the non-voting delegates while the High Command was in congress?!

Even the usually composed Yang Ming Hua seemed agitated: “Who?!”

ZiChuan Xiu was already on his feet, staring in anger; he could tell it was Di Lin's voice!

Everyone could feel the sudden chill in the room when one of the three Heroes of ZiChuan, the Red Banner Master Di Lin, walked into the room.

Di Lin was quite tall and walked in large strides. Despite his imposing size, his face was rather feminine. He had crescent eyebrows over sparkling eyes, thin lips, a handsome nose and smooth skin. Just walking down the street, all sorts of perverts would have hit on him, were it not for his large, broad shoulders. In fact, when he was younger, he had so many admirers that they could fill up his entire backyard... But sadly, most of them were men, and the only girl among them was a lesbian. Perhaps one might wonder how his delicate features could fit so well with his unruly arrogance and cruel demeanor, but that was exactly his unique charm..

However, at that very moment, no one would treat him like a girl, because no girl would ever appear so threatening and overbearing at the same time. At that very moment, every follicle of his skin reeked the scent of provocation.

He was a capable general under Yang Ming Hua's command.

...

He glanced at ZiChuan Xiu in disdain as he apologized to Yang Ming Hua: “Upon hearing about my good friend Master Xiu's return from the Far East, I was so excited that I couldn't resist, and I had to come see him for myself. I'm terribly sorry for interrupting the Conference. I will gladly accept any punishment you

deem fit, Sir!”

Even though Di Lin spoke to Yang Ming Hua the whole time, his ominous gaze never left the face of ZiChuan Xiu, as if he would suddenly disappear from his sight given the opportunity. Clearly he hated his “good friend” ZiChuan Xiu very much.

All of the commanders present knew the story. A couple of years ago, when the three young heroes of ZiChuan: ZiChuan Xiu, Di Lin and Stirling were still in the Far Eastern Army Academy, they were the closest friends, before they all fell in love with the same girl, Lin Xiu Jia...

A fierce contest later, Di Lin successfully won over the girl, but the friends became enemies, like water and ice. With ZiChuan Xiu and Stirling on the losing side, and Di Lin on the winning side, they had fought each other many times in secret, with no clear victor. Their grievance had only deepened since then.

In the end, Stirling went to serve the Headmaster of the family: ZiChuan Shen Xing, while Di Lin went to join the Supreme Commander Yang Ming Hua. Thanks to his talents, he easily won Yang Ming Hua’s favor, which led to his career on a fast track. By the age of 24, he had already been promoted to the rank of Red Banner Master and had become a capable lieutenant under the command of Yang Ming Hua.

...

“Di Lin, you are out of line!” Yang Ming Hua snapped at him, as though he could barely suppress his anger: “Where do you think you are? Take a close look around you. This is the High Command! It is not a place where you can just come and go as you please!”

Di Lin apologized again more sincerely: “I was too excited to see my “good friend” Master Xiu and I couldn’t control of myself... I deserve to be punished by death!” Even though he said “death”, he was not worried in the slightest for someone in his position. His tone revealed an aura of arrogance.

“I suppose it is understandable!” Yang Ming Hua instantly softened his voice: “The downside of being young is being often too emotional. What wouldn’t you do in the name of friendship? Since you are being such a good sport, I will spare you this time... Remember to not do it again!”

“Yes Sir! I will not repeat the same mistake again!”

Just like a pre-rehearsed script, the two echoed each other, turning a death penalty for interrupting the Conference held in High Command into something insignificant, and then into nothing at all.

...

“Di Lin, after coming here in such hurry, what is it that you want with Deputy Commander Xiu?”

“I have not seen Commander Xiu for many years and I have missed him dearly. I wished to invite him over so we can talk and catch up on lost times... I wonder if Commander Xiu is willing to grant me this request.”

Di Lin stared at ZiChuan Xiu with his eyes unmoving, and his mouth smirking in a provocative way. The way they eyed each other was like two hungry wolves challenging each other for territory in the forest!

It was a duel invitation!

ZiChuan Xiu muttered under his breath, but didn't answer him directly. He was probably thinking about whether or not he should accept the challenge, and how likely it was that he would win... It wasn't too surprising, because after all, Di Lin's fast sword technique was notorious for its deadliness. If there was an official ranking, he would probably be considered to be ranked in the top ten fighters of House ZiChuan.

...

Yang Ming Hua: “Oh come on, you're being too hasty... Can't you see Ah Xiu is here in his official capacity? Right now he is just going to politely refuse due to being on official business. And guess what, it will be a great excuse, especially when a “good friend” is asking to “speak” to you. In the end, we all treasure our lives! Ah Xiu, I'm sure you will do the right thing, no?”

Yang Ming Hua wasn't trying to mediate; instead, it was more like he was adding fuel to the fire.

ZiChuan Xiu was getting nervous.

Di Lin smiled coldly: “Ah Xiu, my friend. I hope it is not because you have been

fighting demons for so long and have even learned their favourite move... Actually, why don't you get yourself a shell as well and wrap yourself with it, then you would be truly safe!" He was comparing him to a turtle.

Lei Xun commented in a peculiar manner: "Di Lin, don't be so mean to Commander Xiu... What if he starts crying?"

Di Lin suddenly seemed to have realized something: "Right, I shouldn't have assumed... I can't believe I thought he was a man all this time... Isn't that stupid of me?"

Facing such humiliating insults, even ZiChuan Xiu couldn't resist any longer!

Ignoring Fang Jin's pull on his sleeves and Ge Ying Xing's eyes hinting the obvious, he answered defiantly: "I humbly request permission to have an extended "talk" with Red Banner Master, Di Lin!"

"What a touching friendship!" Lei Xun chuckled: "What reason do we have to deny the reunion of such "good friends"?"

Yang Ming Hua nodded in agreement: "Very well then, I will allow Ah Xiu to excuse himself. You may find a room here in High Command to "catch up"!"

ZiChuan Xiu and Di Lin both bowed in respect: "Thank you for your understanding, Sir!"

...

Di Lin and Yang Ming Hua gave each other a look of understanding, and then walked towards the door before ZiChuan Xiu could.

Just as ZiChuan Xiu was about to follow, Fang Jin whispered to him from behind: "Be careful of his blade! Don't let him take the initiative; close in on him first!" He added: "If things don't work out, make sure to cry for help... We will intervene as fast as we can! There is no shame."

ZiChuan Xiu nodded, showing that he understood. But his stubborn face clearly indicated the opposite: He had already made up his mind; he wouldn't call for help even if he was about to die.

Ge Ying Xing kept his silence, but his gaze was filled with concern. They looked at each other, and everything was spoken without a single word... Ge Ying Xing

nodded slightly, and ZiChuan Xiu bowed towards him in gratitude. His expression was exceptionally calm, as if he had nothing left to worry about. Ge Ying Xing had already sworn a vow that he would never break: If anything happened to ZiChuan Xiu, he would protect Lady ZiChuan Ning with his life.

Escorted by everyone's gazes, Di Lin and ZiChuan Xiu went inside a room and closed the door behind them: Soon sound of curses, punching, kicking, weapons clashing and furniture breaking exploded from behind the doors...

When the door opened, who would be the one to come out alive?



# Despicable Bastard

“ZiChuan Xiu, today is your last!”

“ZiChuan Xiu, let’s settle all our grievances here and now!”

“ZiChuan Xiu, you didn’t see this one coming, did you? Hahaha, God is just. Your time has come!”

While Di Lin was shouting in the door’s direction, ZiChuan Xiu casually ate the chocolate cookies from the jar. Di Lin, clearly unsatisfied, turned towards him and whispered: “Stop sitting on your ass! My throat is hurting; it is your turn! And why are you eating?!”

Stuffing the last piece of cookie in his mouth, ZiChuan Xiu shouted inaudible words: “Di Lin, only one of us will leave this room alive!” Then he whispered to Di Lin: “I spent my entire morning listening to their boring speeches; how will I have the energy to put up an act if I don’t eat something? Anyways, how is Xiu Jia?”

“ZiChuan Xiu, you bloody pervert! I will rid the world of your filth!” Di Lin whispered again: “She is fine! But can you stop asking about someone else’s wife whenever you meet them? And since when are you on a first name basis with her? You should call her Mrs. Di or Sister-in-Law! Or I might just beat you up for real!”

“Tch, I'd like to see you try!” ZiChuan Xiu whispered: “Don’t be paranoid... If we didn’t lose that dice game back then, did you really think Lin Xiu Jia would want to marry you?”

Di Lin responded in a whisper: “That just means that it was God’s will. Lin Xiu Jia was destined to be my wife. Don’t be a sore loser!”

ZiChuan Xiu lowered his voice: “God’s will? Bullshit! When I cut open the dice later, it was filled with mercury and magnets... No wonder Stirling and I kept throwing ones and twos while you were getting triple sixes! Before the dice even

came to a halt, you were already racing towards Lin Jia Xiu to propose! Even though everyone knew that she liked me!”

Di Lin whispered back: “All lies! Even if we fought for it fair and square, she wouldn’t have chosen you. You weren’t even sixteen years old at the time; you were still wearing diapers. Why would my wife have fancied you?”

The two of them stared at each other, and suddenly, the mood changed.

“Vile lowlife!”

“Stupid shit!”

“Shameless turd!”

“F\*ck you... son of a bitch!”

“Go to hell!”

“You first!”

...

Di Lin continued: “Yang Ming Hua is planning a coup!” With that, he sent the table flying with a kick, splashing the furniture all over the wall.

ZiChuan Xiu replied: “That's nothing new. I heard that same shit ten times a day back in the Far East, and now I’m hearing it two dozen times a day.” He quickly moved his own chair aside, afraid that Di Lin would kick his chair down as well. He didn’t want to sit on the table.

Di Lin: “You are ranked number three on Yang Ming Hua’s must kill list... Is that news enough for you?”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” ZiChuan Xiu roared loudly, sending shockwaves throughout the entire building, as if a fierce battle was actually taking place... Then whispered: “Hmm. Who else is on the list?”

Di Lin answered: “Ge Ying Xing is number one, Stirling is number two, and the Headmaster ZiChuan Shen Xing who couldn’t get into the top three, is number four.”

“What about Lady Ning?”

“Don’t worry, Lady Ning is fine. Yang Ming Hua is planning to make her into a

puppet after killing the Headmaster!”

“Should we try to inform Commander Ge Ying Xing? Perhaps he doesn’t know yet...”

“How could he not?! There is nothing that the old fox doesn’t know! Don’t be fooled by his sickly appearance... Let me tell you, Yang Ming Hua has tried four times and sent over seventeen assassins after him!”

“And?”

“Nothing. Those seventeen assassins never showed up again, as though they never existed in the first place! The next day when the sun rises, you will still see Ge Ying Xing with one foot in the grave, as if he will drop dead any moment. Who knows, perhaps when we are all dead, he will still be around for another hundred years! He is insanely crafty; the entire Far Eastern Region is his territory. Yang Ming Hua’s men couldn’t get near him at all.”

“But now that he is here in Di Du, doesn’t that make him an easy target?”

“Yang Ming Hua wouldn’t even dream of it. Ge Ying Xing brought with him six thousand personal guards. Every one of them is brave and loyal only to him. Unless you attacked with a whole army, you wouldn’t even get within two miles of his mansion!”

“What about the number two, Stirling...”

“Stirling is currently the Deputy Commander of the Imperial Guard; he doesn’t leave the House of Headmaster except for emergencies... Besides, there is no one under Yang Ming Hua’s command capable of silencing Stirling without anyone noticing... I mean except me, of course! Deliver a message from me when you see him, the Deputy Banner Master Yun He and Fang Ge under his command have been bought by Yang Ming Hua.”

ZiChuan Xiu shattered a precious vase on the ground, showing the ones standing outside that the duel was still taking place!

Di Lin watched him curiously: “I don’t understand why a certain someone isn’t worried. He is not the Deputy Commander of the Imperial Guard, nor has he the protection of six thousand personal guards. He is however unfortunately listed in the must kill list, an unimportant person whom no one would care about even if

he was killed, the insignificant Deputy Commander of the army reserve. I suggest you leave Lady Ning's house while you still can. It is bad enough that you may get killed any moment, but it will be worse if you give Lady Ning a scare, not to mention that she will have to clean up your corpse as well."

ZiChuan Xiu asked: "How much army does Yang Ming Hua currently control?"

"A lot! Lei Xun's seventeen hundred thousand-soldier Central Army is under his direct command. If a battle really does break out, Stirling's Imperial Guards will be wiped out in under an hour!"

"Any strong fighters?"

"Central Army has historically always been House ZiChuan's most elite force. There are many capable fighters amongst the Central Army. Even though their commander Lei Xun is notorious for his greediness and lust for grandeur, his technique of wind and thunder is not a joke. Every time someone calls him the number one fighter he would always crack a wide smile. Chief of Staff, Luo Ming Hai has always kept a low profile... Even now I do not know what he is capable of. And lastly, Yang Ming Hua himself is no slouch either; his inner wave technique is very scary..."

Holding his chin, ZiChuan Xiu considered the possibilities and asked Di Lin again in all seriousness: "So, do you think I can just talk to Yang Ming Hua and work out our differences, you know, like friends..."

...

"If Yang Ming Hua has so many forces at his beck and call, what is he waiting for?"

"He is afraid of Ge Ying Xing, Ming Hui, Fang Jing and the other Commanders who command large armies in other regions... If Ge Ying Xing raises the banner and calls for support in response to his open rebellion, a million soldiers of the Far Eastern Army would arrive at his doorstep. Even with the Central Army's support, Yang Ming Hua would not be able to fight against that." Di Lin exercised the swift slash of his sword, and the sound of his blade carving through the air echoed throughout the room.

"What is he planning now?" ZiChuan Xiu asked, while breaking another antique

folding screen.

“He has a two-step plan. Step one, rope Fang Jing and Ming Hui into his scheme... Once he manages to bribe either one of them, Black Banner Army and Border Army will have to contend with each other, and will be thus unable to respond to any disturbance in the Capital. Step two, he is sending me to the Far Eastern Army, to take over your former position. He wants me to destroy the Far Eastern Army from within.”

“Should I tell Commander Ge Ying Xing of your true allegiance? The Far East is his territory. If you don’t tell him, you won’t be able to accomplish anything over there; he will have you on a complete lock down.” Having said that, ZiChuan Xiu broke another antique vase; the shattering sound pierced through the air loud and clear.

“Fine, but only him... My position is very dangerous as it is; nobody else can know! Right now even I don't know whom I can trust.”

...

During the three years that the three friends, who would die for each other, were separated, one had to fight for his survival in the field of battle, one had to go undercover and nest with the tiger, and one had to fearlessly face Yang Ming Hua in the open... And now Di Lin was about to enter the field of battle, while ZiChuan Xiu and Stirling had to fight a different kind of battle in this peaceful and prosperous Capital City, a battle without sound nor form, but deadly nonetheless.

They looked at each other, witnessing the deep concerns in other’s eyes. Joining hands, the warmth of their blood transmitted their brotherly love from one to the other! They were deeply touched, but no tears were allowed, only a few unspoken words left stuck in their heart: “Brother, take care!”

They both had to risk their lives. They were both loyal to a fault, for that one vow they made many, many years ago, without regrets, to someone who had passed but had not disappeared, to someone whose had shielded the entire Capital City – ZiChuan Yuan Xing.

Di Lin suddenly remembered: “Ah Xiu, you can’t just go outside like this without any injuries; they will be suspicious. I think we have to...”

A bunch of punches and kicks later, Di Lin decided to leave a few more marks of battle behind on ZiChuan Xiu.

ZiChuan Xiu cried: “Hold on! Haven’t you done enough? Why are you getting more excited?”

Di Lin explained (painfully): “You don’t understand. Do you have any idea how difficult it is for me to inflict such pain on a brother of mine out of necessity? The kind of heartfelt pain I’m experiencing right now is much worse than the physical one you have!”

ZiChuan Xiu argued: “Then why are you smiling like that? How about we ease the pain of your heart, and let my conscience take the blame instead.”

Another wave of kicks and punches later...

Di Lin: “For realism's sake, we are still missing some cuts and blood...”

ZiChuan Xiu (almost dead): “I can’t take this anymore... why don’t you just kill me instead?!”

...

Di Lin sighed: "Now that it has come to this, I might as well..."

ZiChuan Xiu’ eyes widened as Di Lin grabbed a make-up box from his pocket and a coloured bottle...

“That... that is...”

“Correct, this is the paint actors use to appear being wounded. It's a type of red ink that looks like blood, and is super rare! I brought it on a business trip in Hollywood; it cost me a fortune!”

“That is not what I meant... If you had something like that, then why didn’t you use it earlier; why did I have to...?”

Di Lin smirked wickedly, leaning in close to ZiChuan Xiu, and whispered into his ears: “Answer A: Because I forgot! Answer B: Because I did it on purpose. Answer C: Because during my birthday party after I blew all the candles, someone stole a kiss from my wife. Answer D: Because I have waited a long time for this! So which one would you choose, Ah Xiu, my brother?” His lips brushed against ZiChuan Xiu’s ear as he said that.

The door was finally opened. With his head held high, Red Banner Master Di Lin walked out like a winner. He casually brushed the dust off his uniform and wiped his hands; it was clear that he had won the duel effortlessly!

Lying in a pool of blood, ZiChuan Xiu was wounded from head to toe and was left on the verge of death. Using his last bit of strength, he raised a finger and cursed as loud as he could: “Di Lin, you despicable bastard!”

# Purple River - Chapter 3

## Conversation

“Ning, I love you!”

After dinner, while reading the recently received letters, ZiChuan Xiu spoke thoughtfully to ZiChuan Ning, who sat on the opposite side of the table sipping tea.

Splat! Bai Chuan’s tea cup shattered on the ground and Luo Jie coughed loudly; a big chunk of cake was stuck in his throat and he was unable to breathe. Chang Chuan stared as his mouth dropped open wide enough to fit a handful of eggs; he didn’t even notice when Luo Jie snatched his wallet...

ZiChuan Ning could only feel her heartbeat quickening with shortness of breath, and her cheeks burned bright red...but it was with the flame of joy. All this time, everything she had hoped and ached to hear from her beloved...would today be the day it would happen?

“I love you!” ZiChuan Xiu spoke solemnly: “So erm... Can you lend me some money? Damn those bastards at the High Command! It was obviously Di Lin’s fault; why are they sending the bloody bill for the broken furniture to me?! My salary from last month was used to cover that stupid bill at the Heaven’s Dream restaurant...that reminds me; I will get you back, Bai Chuan! Hey, Ning, where are you going?! I haven’t finished yet, wait!”

“Damn it, teenagers these days; how can she leave halfway during my confession? Nobody appreciates true love anymore!”

ZiChuan Xiu sighed in defeat, turning towards Bai Chuan, and spoke thoughtfully: “Bai Chuan, I love you...”



Smack! Suddenly, countless stars appeared before ZiChuan Xiu's eyes, but they were all coin-shaped!

...

Servants came to deliver the message; Deputy Commander of the Imperial Guard – Stirling, was coming to visit.

ZiChuan Xiu couldn't have been happier as he dashed out of the room.

Stirling was twenty-three at the time; the brightest period of one's youth. Everything about him was filled with energy. He was of medium height, had an avid short haircut, light brown skin and a pair of sharp eyes. He was a rather dashing young man...but unlike ZiChuan Xiu's fragile, spoiled unruliness or Di Lin's arrogant and frosty aloofness, Stirling was more of a righteous and masculine man; he had the kind of straightforward handsomeness that was befitting of a soldier. He was dignified, outspoken, genuine, and passionate.

Historians would later refer to him as the "Model Soldier during the Golden Age." His contemporary friend, ZiChuan Xiu, would describe him as: "Stirling was born to be a soldier!"

ZiChuan Ning had also made a comparison of the three young Heroes of the House: "Stirling was like a ferocious tiger and a natural leader; Di Lin was like a cobra, cold, cruel, and aloof; ZiChuan Xiu was...hard to describe, I can only compare him to a nasty slug..."

...

In order to have some privacy, the two met in the garden.

"I heard you went to the High Command today. Who did you talk to?"

ZiChuan Xiu explained everything that happened earlier that day in detail and Stirling listened closely to every word, before finally exhaling sympathetically: "Di Lin has a tough road ahead! His situation is the most dangerous; he must be under a lot of pressure right now."

"But the information he provided has proven invaluable. What are you going to do about the two spies in your midst?"

"I will keep an eye out for now...getting rid of them right away is like telling

Yang Ming Hua that Di Lin is on our side!”

“Brother, I have always wondered; if everyone knew that Yang Ming Hua couldn’t be trusted, then why didn’t Headmaster ZiChuan Shen Xing call back the Far Eastern Army and take care of him? Could he really be...as they say?” ZiChuan Xiu swallowed back the word “incompetent.”

“Nobody knows what ZiChuan Shen Xing is really like.” Stirling sighed in defeat: “I’m one of his most trusted confidants, but even so I can’t tell what he is thinking half of the time...but he is definitely not incompetent. Aren’t there many who thought you to be stupid, spoiled, and incompetent as well?

ZiChuan Xiu smirked as he thought of Luo Jie, Bai Chuan, and Chang Chuan.

“As to recalling large forces to deal with Yang Ming Hua, that plan is simply unrealistic. In order to contend with the Central Army made of seventeen hundred thousand strong soldiers, we have to recall at least two hundred thousand soldiers from the Far Eastern Army, a hundred thousand from the Border Army, and eighty thousand from the Black Banner Army. It is impossible to camouflage such large military operation from Yang Ming Hua’s eyes and ears. It would only force him to show his hand. If that happened, we would all be fucked.”

ZiChuan Xiu smiled bitterly: “And so, we are in a stalemate!”

“Exactly, neither side dares to openly declare war on the other, so we are resorting to a form of cold war.” Stirling continued: “Di Lin’s advice rings true; you need to be careful. There have been many incidents recently in the dark corners of our Capital City – Di Du. Almost every morning, the garbage collectors find a dead body lying somewhere. Many powerful and influential figures ended up that way. Just last week, one of my Deputy Banner Masters was dragged away after getting drunk in a bar. We found his body three days later floating in the city moat.”

“What did you...?” ZiChuan Xiu knew his friend all too well; Stirling would never let something like that slide.

“Well, nothing...but two days ago, I heard that Commander Lei Xun’s stepson, Banner Master Lei Xiao Yun was found dead in his mistress’ home. The City Guards (Di Du’s security force) thought it was a robbery and are looking for the

killer amongst the unemployed and the local gangsters. How unfortunate!”

“Haha.” ZiChuan Xiu laughed wholeheartedly. This serious kind of humor from Stirling could always get a few kicks out of him.

...

“So, Xiu, what are you going to do now?”

“Well, since it is getting so dangerous...the honest, timid and cowardly ZiChuan Xiu can only find a place to hide until the two giants fight it out. I will come back when they are done and shake the hands with the victor.”

“Timid and cowardly? Who are you referring to?”

The two eyed each other and laughed.

“Come with me, Xiu! We will serve the Headmaster together.”

“Stirling, I remember when we were still children. You, me and Di Lin had all made a vow to the former Headmaster – ZiChuan Yuan Xing, to serve Lady ZiChuan Ning. Have you forgotten?”

“I remember. But given our current circumstances, we can only protect Lady Ning by helping Headmaster – ZiChuan Shen Xing against Yang Ming Hua. Am I wrong?”

ZiChuan Xiu hesitated.

“I know you are still holding a grudge against the Headmaster for what happened six years ago. But back then, he had only just become the Headmaster, and everything was under Yang Ming Hua’s control. He had no choice but to side with Yang Ming Hua against you! He told me many times afterwards that he regretted what happened, that he shouldn’t have done what he did. He was sincere; please forgive him.”

“Besides, we now all have a common enemy, Yang Ming Hua. No matter what you do, Yang Ming Hua will not spare you. The only way out is together!”

ZiChuan Xiu smiled: “Let me think about it. I heard you and Banner Master Li Qing are getting married?”

Stirling smiled back, he had always known ZiChuan Xiu’s signature move –

whenever ZiChuan Xiu didn't like the topic of the conversation, he would always begin with "Let me think about it," and then come up with all kinds of unrelated topics to derail the conversation!

Stirling didn't press him further: "That is right. We are planning to hold the ceremony after everything is finished."

"I brought a whole bunch of goblins back from the Far East, how about I send her a pair or two?"

"That would be great! She had always wanted a goblin servant, but the market price went up to thirty thousand a head. Clearly it is more profitable being on the front line!"

"What are you talking about? In the entire House of ZiChuan, only the uniform of the Imperial Army is laced with gold...you are not fooling anyone! Very well, so that counts as your wedding present!"

"No way! That counts as extra, wedding present not included. Don't you dare skip out on me!"

...

"Everything is such a mess. I really hope that House Liu Feng doesn't come and stir the pot right now."

"You don't have to worry about that. They don't have time for us right now! Their Headmaster – Liu Feng Xi Shan is on his deathbed. They are doing pretty much the same thing we are; struggling for power. Liu Feng Xi Shan's three sons are all incompetent, which is the reason for his indecision. He can't seem to decide on whom to give his seat to, since each one of them looks worse than the other two."

"Thank the gods that Liu Feng Shuang is a girl and has no succession rights, or else we would be in big trouble."

"Indeed. But I heard Liu Feng Xi Shan has recently given her the title of 'The Guardian!'"

"What does that mean?"

"That means even though Liu Feng Xi Shan is not happy with any of his sons, it

doesn't matter who succeeds; as long as they have Liu Feng Shuang's support, House Liu Feng will not fall."

"What an effort. I heard you faced Liu Feng Shuang's force during the second invasion. How did that go?"

Recalling, Stirling exhaled deeply: "Liu Feng Shuang is the real deal!"

"We had Liu Feng Ming's and Liu Feng Qing's almost two hundred thousand men surrounded...Their lines were beginning to crumble; just a bit more and they would have been annihilated, but then Liu Feng Shuang's forces appeared. She didn't raise her banner; her numbers were less than eight thousand and were all Calvary as well."

"Fang Jing, Ming Hui, Yang Li (The former Border Army Commander) and I were four officers on the frontline, and none of us took those eight thousand riders seriously. Fang Jing only sent three infantry formations to thwart their attack and it was a sound strategy. Nobody expected her to crush the three infantry formations in less than ten minutes; her unit was simply too well organized! She broke through another infantry division of Yang Li soon after, and then all the way through our encirclement."

"By the time we realized something was amiss and tried to organize a counter-offensive, it was already too late! By then the white banner with red letters was already raised high – 'Liu Feng Shuang'. The moment the two hundred thousand encircled soldiers of Liu Feng Army saw her banner, the roar of 'Hail! Commander Shuang has arrived; we are saved! Kill the ZiChuan Dogs!' erupted and shook the earth. After a full day of battle, they should have been exhausted and distraught, but when Liu Feng Shuang arrived, it was as if they were possessed. Their warcries shattered our confidence...and Liu Feng Shuang, a meek little girl, unafraid of rain of arrows, stripped down to her waist and stood firmly beneath her banner. She let the entire battlefield watch her swinging her sabre shouting: "Soldiers of House Liu Feng, are you afraid when a woman is not? Muster your courage and attack!" You just have to respect that kind of gallantry. Her personal guards were crazy as well, shielding her from the incoming arrows with their bare body. When one fell, another one took his place..."

“So the army of House Liu Feng came at us like mad men. That snake Ming Hui hastily retreated the moment he saw Liu Feng Shuang’s banner; Yang Li gave the order to hold the lines in the midst of chaos and as a result, his forces suffered heavy casualties and soon crumbled. Luckily me and Fang Jing secured our backlines together. We had to fend her off constantly during the retreat and she kept chasing us for several hundred miles until Ming Hui’s Border Army joined us at the border. Only then did she give up.”

Stirling expressed a sense of pride: “But I can say with certainty that my unit is not inferior to hers; despite her relentless attacks, my unit could always hold their ground, while the other units all crumbled under the pressure! She chased us almost a thousand miles, but she still couldn’t break my lines! During the last skirmish, I even gained the upper hand!”

He turned towards ZiChuan Xiu: “Hey! Why...why the hell...are you asleep?!”

“Blah blah! So bloody boring, who wouldn’t fall asleep?!”

...

Entering the Guest Hall, the view left Stirling stunned.

“Assassin?” ZiChuan Xiu reacted behind him and quickened his steps. Ready for himself for battle, he dashed into the Guest Hall!

All he saw was Bai Chuan, Luo Jie, and Chang Chuan, the three clowns sitting on the couch and shamelessly enjoying Lady Ning’s hospitality.

“What is the problem?” ZiChuan Xiu followed Stirling’s gaze, and noticed the fourth person. Even though she sat on the soft couch, her posture was straight and dignified. She was not interested at all in the rich and well-prepared meal spread across the table.

It was the Demon Princess – Ka Dan.

## Falling in Love is the Worst

“Is something wrong?” ZiChuan Xiu poked at Stirling’s waist.

“Huh, oh, what?” Stirling gibbered senselessly: “What’s wrong?”

ZiChuan Xiu gave him a strange frown, but didn’t say anything.

Stirling's composure instantly returned to normal, and he walked into the Guest Hall.

Staring at the shadows casted by Stirling's back, ZiChuan Xiu was riddled with worries: “I hope it is not what I think it is...”

Luo Jie, Bai Chuan, and Chang Chuan immediately stood up and saluted. Thanks to his exceptional talents, dazzling charm, and charisma, Stirling had become the new generation of ZiChuan Soldiers' idol. The younger officers like Bai Chuan might not have recognized more powerful figures like the Headmaster or the Supreme Commander, but they would never mistake the sight of Stirling. Luo Jie had admired him for a long time.

Even though it was the first time they had met, all of them could tell that Stirling was different from his usual self...

According to Commander Bai Chuan’s personal memoirs – “The Days with his Lordship”.

“...He (Stirling) greeted us as expected and spoke appropriately for someone of his station. He even shared a frozen watermelon with us on the couch and answered any questions we had regarding the art of war... Everything seemed normal, but somehow I could always sense that he wasn’t entirely comfortable in his own skin... Very peculiar indeed. I told myself that perhaps it was what you would call a woman’s instinct?”

Later, another officer at the scene, Adjutant General Luo Jie had this to say: “Don’t you believe the 'woman’s instinct' crap that old hag Bai Chuan has been spewing. That entire memoir of hers was a scam. It was all made up and written

by a hired gun. She doesn't even know the meaning of 'How are you?' Even an idiot could tell that Stirling was off his game! How else could a Master like Stirling hurt his own hand when cutting open a watermelon? Or ask us the same question five times? 'When did you come back to Di Du?', 'You guys came back when?', 'When was it again?' ...Even though we gave him a clear answer every time, he had to ask it again in less than three minutes."

Chief of Staff, Chang Chuan added: "Also, Master Xiu just stood there, not saying anything, but kept laughing like two Yang Ming Hua's and a Lei Xun added together. You could tell just by the sneaky way he laughed that something was afoot!"

...

After leaving ZiChuan Ning's mansion, ZiChuan Xiu decided to walk Stirling home.

"The stars are really bright tonight!" Stirling spoke flatly, as if he was making a statement.

ZiChuan Xiu looked at the cloudy sky, raised his eyebrows, and said: "Of course!"

"The moon is exceptionally large as well!"

"Sure." Even though no moon could be seen that night.

"Look at how clean the streets are in the capital!"

"You are right." ZiChuan Xiu had just stepped on a dead cat.

"You didn't have to walk me home. I'm sure you have a lot of things waiting for you to do as it is..."

"Bullshit."

"..."

"..."

"Thanks for the gift by the way, Li Qing will be glad."

"You're welcome."

"Is everything all right with Lady Ning? I didn't get to see her tonight."



“She is fine.”

“What was her name?”

“Ka Dan.”

The pair stopped where they stood. ZiChuan Xiu stared at Stirling, but the latter avoided the gaze of the former.

Silence.

Finally, ZiChuan Xiu spoke slowly, one word at a time: “Princess Ka Dan, the third daughter of the current Demon God King. She is my spoil of war from the fifth battle of Heng Chuan. The High Command made her my ward.”

Stirling’s lips were trembling, lacking their usual calm courage.

“You knew?”

“I’m not blind.”

“Do you think badly of me?”

“Nope.” Turning his face away, ZiChuan Xiu replied after considering it a bit more: “Not more than usual, anyway.”

“I have a fiancé, and she loves me very much.”

“I know. Li Qing is a great woman.”

“She is the Demon God King’s daughter, a Demon.”

“And royalty, no less!”

...

The pair halted their steps once again, inspecting each other closely.

“What should I do?”

“Do you really want to hear me talk about how a high ranking officer of the ZiChuan Army should behave himself, have devotion to the cause, and the selflessness and courage to sacrifice oneself for the greater good?”

“Fuck you @#4#&&##!”

“ ... ”

“Sorry, that was uncalled for.”

“It is alright, but there are several ways to deal with this... Do you want to hear about the long-term solutions, the mid-term solutions, or the short-term solutions?”

“Let’s start with the long-term.”

“The long-term solution can also be called: The Decisive Solution. Solution number one: Tie a knot of rope on the ceiling, and step on a chair. Put your neck through the loop and kick away the chair. Solution number two: Go to the Great Demon Fortress and challenge the Demon God King to a single combat match. Solution number three: On the 1st of January, assassinate Yang Ming Hua during the annual military parade. So which one of the solutions do you prefer?”

“...”

“Not to your liking? That's alright, we still have the mid-term solutions! Like castrating yourself with a razorblade... Other than the technical difficulties which may become present when performing such a deed, its effectiveness and health risks are both inferior to the solutions mentioned earlier...”

“Shut the fuck up!”

“Or perhaps you can act like a horny teenager. Buy a dozen roses and send them to Princess Ka Dan. Wait beneath her window every night till the sun rises, sing her love songs, and play the guitar. Make your heart race without stopping whenever you catch a glimpse of her shadow...though you might want to watch out for your future father-in-law!”

“I told you to shut up!”

“No good? Well then, there is only one final solution left... Since I’m her guardian, I can lock her up somewhere alone and secluded; I can even give you the keys...”

Stirling instantly punched ZiChuan Xiu in the face, sending him tumbling to the ground. Slowly regaining his footing, ZiChuan Xiu took a handkerchief from Stirling and wiped off the blood around the corner of his mouth, speaking slowly: “If you ask me, I’d rather kill you than see you walk down this road... Death can be swift and painless.” ZiChuan Xiu spoke in a deeper voice: “Give up, brother.

This is madness. We both know that if there was the slightest hope, I would have helped you, no matter the cost. But this time... you are no longer fifteen years old! I'm sure you are just having a crush! She doesn't even know who you are!"

Stirling remained silent; the usual fire was missing from his eyes. He could have been paying attention to the conversation, but he could have been somewhere else entirely as well...

...

"..."

"This is the first time I have felt this way." Stirling's voice was soft, but the tone was resolute: "I love her."

"No, you don't!" ZiChuan Xiu argued back, softly: "And don't you love Li Qing, as well?"

"It's not the same! With Li Qing... it wasn't love. We just spent a lot of time together, and we got along..."

"So after you have slept with her so many times and are even getting married, you realize only now that it was not 'love'? Isn't it too bloody late for that?"

"It is too late... That's the problem; only now do I realize what 'love' is!"

"Then go kill yourself and see if I care!" ZiChuan Xiu finally lost his patience and shouted in anger: "What was the point of me trying to change your mind when all you care about is how you feel? Aren't you tired of being alive? Why don't you just slit your throat then; surely that would be faster?!"

"I'm aware."

Stirling saw a little tavern next to the road and smiled: "I just found another solution—alcohol, the solution to all worries! Come, it is my treat."

"Wait, I can't! I have to report to the Executive Office tomorrow! Yang Ming Hua wants me to be the Deputy Division Chief. I'm not allowed to drink tonight..."

Stirling ignored his protests and entered the tavern.

ZiChuan Xiu understood: "Shit, he is serious this time! Why can't it be a good

woman like Li Qing? Instead, he has to fall in love with the Demon God King's daughter... What is wrong with this world?! Love... is clearly the root of all evil!"

...

Yet, the one asking these questions could never have guessed that many years later, he would find himself in the midst of an even more bitter love struggle. It would be the most famous and heart-wrenching love story during the golden age. However, that is a tale for another time...

Imperial Calendar Year 778, August: On the hottest day of the month, Stirling was 23, Di Lin was 24 and ZiChuan Xiu was 18. The three young heroes of House ZiChuan found themselves swept away by the whirlpool of time, unable to escape, struggling. It was a period of their lives when they had no control over the directions of their future. However, the days when they could were rapidly approaching...

## The new Deputy Division Chief

“You claim to be the new Deputy Division Chief?” The security guard at the door looked like he had just heard the funniest joke in the world.

“Err, Yes.” ZiChuan Xiu lowered his voice, knowing he didn’t look very convincing at the moment. Nobody knew how it actually happened, but after getting drunk last night with Stirling, they got into a fist fight with some local thugs. The event last night had taught him two things: First, the combat strength of two top tier fighters together when drunk is no better than a pig's; Second, the sewers in the capital smelled really bad... especially for sore losers who were thrown into it and had to spend the night in the mud. By the time the waste collectors came in the morning to find their bodies and wake them up, ZiChuan Xiu didn't even have time to change his clothing before he had to report to the Administrative Office, and thus...

“Documents?”

“I left them at home.” Though most likely they were stolen by the thugs when they searched for his wallet.

“Of course, another one who left it at home.” The security guard sounded very understanding but the way he moved his giant baton proved otherwise: “Listen kid, we get a couple of troublemakers like you every month, but someone who comes all the way here like you did... well, that's a first!” He raised his eyebrow and continued: “Are you drunk?! God, what is that yellow stain on your shirt? Is it shit or mud? And what is with your face, why is it swollen like a panda?”

“Please.” ZiChuan Xiu begged: “I have to report to your Division Chief – Ge Shan; I’m already late!”

“Right, and I'm the bloody Headmaster!” The security guard clearly didn’t believe him. Then again, ZiChuan Xiu had to admit he had every reason not to.

Glancing around to make sure no one was paying them any attention, ZiChuan Xiu took a deep breath: “I’m sorry, friend!” He casually tapped the guard’s

shoulder, and suddenly, the guard fell limp at his feet. Quickly catching him in his arms, ZiChuan Xiu made it look as though the guard was taking a nap leaning against the wall.

...

“Where is Division Chief’s office?”

The question left the staff in complete shock; confused, they each pointed in a different direction. It could have only been a miracle that ZiChuan Xiu somehow managed to find the right way in the end.

The female assistant outside Chief’s office was shocked by the swiftly approaching madman. Blocking his path, she shouted: “You may not pass! You don’t have an appointment... I’m calling the guards!”

By then ZiChuan Xiu had already entered through the office door.

At the opposite end of the spacious office room, a rather pretty lady sat behind a desk, reading documents. She wasn’t startled at all by the sudden appearance of ZiChuan Xiu.

His male instinct automatically gave her a score of 8.5.

“Please sit, Commander Xiu; you are 15 minutes late.” Her voice was ice cold, and she showed neither joy nor anger. In fact, she didn’t even bother raising her head when she waved her assistant off with a motion of her hand.

“Right, Sir, I’m sorry, I had to...”

“I have no interest in your personal life, but now that you are a part of my Division, I hope you can start following the regulations and avoid any future indiscretions. Are we clear?”

As the score dropped to a 3.5, ZiChuan Xiu instantly put her into the category of the old virgins who wanted to be loved but weren't, and as a result, they ended up with a mental disorder hating other people who lived a happier life.

“Sir, I’m sorry, next time...”

“Thank you for your apology. I’m sure it will be very useful; who knows, perhaps it can give me back the time I had to waste due to your tardiness.” Ge Shan remarked sarcastically: “Also, there is something else you should know. We

are of the same rank; we are both Deputy Commanders, which means that you don't have to call me Sir."

"Yes, Sir. Oh, I mean, Chief. ZiChuan Xiu, reporting in. I'm at your command."

"Commander Xiu, there is just one thing... I wonder if you can do me a favor."

"Anything you say, your wish is my command."

"Get the fuck out this instant. Go home, take a shower, brush your teeth then come back to work! Because of you, we have to spend at least three air conditioners!"

.....

Facing Bai Chuan, Luo Jie, Chang Chuan, ZiChuan Ning and Ka Dan, ZiChuan Xiu sat in front of them on the couch. Despite the serious and stern look on their faces, the size of their swollen cheeks looked as if a giant frog could be sitting inside.

ZiChuan Xiu sighed, waving in defeat: "It is ok guys, laugh away."

"Wuahahaha!", "Hihihi!", "Hehehe!" ...

Only Ka Dan managed to retain her princess-like demeanor, smiling slightly.

"Sir, you look like a panda with those two black eyes... Hahaha."

Bai Chuan flipped a page from the "Di Du Daily Papers" and read out loud: "Today's hot topic: Today a mental patient who claimed to be Commander Xiu, who recently returned to the Capital from the Far East, broke into the Administrative Office, injuring the security guard in the process. The patient was eventually repelled by the Division Chief – Ge Shan, after breaking and entering into her office. One of the witness, Miss Jing Mei Li, who is a staff at the Administrative Office, has this to say (The picture of a stupid-looking, fat, and ugly woman with a sad expression could be seen between the paragraphs): "It was so scary; he tried to touch me! He was... I mean, it's too embarrassing to say..." The main witness, Division Chief – Ge Shan, has refused to comment on the matter.

Based on the initial report from the official investigation, it was probably the result of the recent collapse of the fences around the local mental hospital three

days ago. The investigation is still ongoing, the official announcement has stated that their aim is to re-capture all the unstable and dangerous mental patients as soon as possible, and that the citizens will have nothing to worry about. All the parties involved have been advised to improve on the maintenance of any local holding facilities. Please report any sightings of the fugitives to the following address: Di Du Ministry of Civil Administration, Public Safety and Maintenance, Section – Third Office.”

A wave of wild laughter arose.

ZiChuan Ning said: “Brother, you are now famous; can I have a signature?”

Luo Jie laughed: “Sir, I knew you were desperate for some female attention... but surely you can do better than this?”

Chang Chuan whispered to ZiChuan Ning: “Where is the Ministry of Civil Administration?”

ZiChuan Xiu asked Bai Chuan: “Where is the article posted? First page or the second?”

After double-checking it, Bai Chuan replied: “It is posted... under the article of Special Treatment for Venereal Syphilis, and above the commercials for Viagra.”

Another wave of wild laughter arose.

The usually silent Ka Dan spoke: “Master Xiu, your eyes... perhaps I can help.”

ZiChuan Xiu had heard long ago of the incredible powers of the Demons, speaking in excitement: “Are you a shaman?”

Ka Dan shook her head.

“Do you have healing abilities?”

Ka Dan shook her head again.

“Do you know healing spells?”

Ka Dan shook her head yet again.

“Then how can you help me?”

Ka Dan reached for a wooden box behind her: “I have something here that can help you. It can disguise your eye injuries and make them invisible to the others...”



But it is very expensive, I'm afraid..."

What was it? Magical pills? Divine medicine? Holy water? ...None of it mattered. ZiChuan Xiu only wanted to not look like a panda anymore.

Without hesitation, he reached for the last two hundred dollars in his pocket and handed them to Ka Dan.

Ka Dan shook her head: "Not enough."

ZiChuan Xiu borrowed another thousand dollars from ZiChuan Ning and gave them to Ka Dan as well.

Ka Dan spoke sympathetically: "Sigh, very well; I'm only doing this because I like your sister, Lady Ning..."

ZiChuan Xiu took the box from her and opened it...

A pair of sunglasses, priced at fifteen dollars, and it didn't even have a brand.

...

According to the historical records: when the King of Light finally took control of the entire Far Eastern region, he treated the lower-class citizens of the Demons exceptionally well, but the Demon royalties were treated harshly. He would punish them whenever he got the chance. As to the exact reason for his polarized treatment of the Demons, one thing was certain: Sometime, somewhere, and for some unknown reason, ZiChuan Xiu had to have suffered at the hand of a Demon Royalty...but the truth will forever remain a mystery, and lost to time

## ZiChuan Shen Xing

Stirling had to struggle getting out of the bed; the sudden headache made it difficult.

The shower helped. Looking at the time, it was already past noon. A lot happened last night, but he could only remember that he was drunk and he got into a fight. As to what happened afterwards... he couldn't even tell how he managed to get home. He did find two wallets inside his pockets... The other one belonged to ZiChuan Xiu. As to how it ended up in his pocket, well, he couldn't remember it at all.

His old servant told him that Lady Li Qing was here earlier and she left him a note.

Picking it up, Li Qing's elegant handwriting greeted him: "You didn't come home last night; both me and Headmaster Shen Xing were worried. We are glad you made it back safely this morning. Though you should consider your status and what you represent, you cannot behave like a fool who spends most of his time drunk. Master Shen Xing has requested your presence. So make sure you do when your mind is clear."

Stirling let out a wry smile; Li Qing was still the same: kind, smart and reliable. There wasn't a word of blame afraid of hurting his pride. What else can a man wish for when you have a great woman like that. If last night didn't happen, she could very well have been his most suitable partner for the rest of his life.

Meanwhile, Stirling had already prepared the excuses for when he sees Li Qing: "I saw Xiu last night. We were overjoyed and I drank a bit too much... I'm sorry. He forced me to go." Stirling was almost certain that ZiChuan Xiu would tell the same kind of lies to Lady Ning: "Stirling forced me to go." Friends were like that. It was a common excuse they use at the time.

A cup of tea later, Stirling instantly felt re-energized, and with that, the usually confident Stirling once again returned to himself.

.....

First thing after arriving at the House of Headmaster, Stirling's usual habit was to inspect its security measures. The best and the most loyal forces of the Imperial Guards – The Death Guard, posted sentries every five feet around the perimeter of the House, and like nails in the ground, they had the place on lockdown. But that was only the first line of defence everyone could see from the outside; inside, archers were secretly assigned to every high vantage point, rooftops, high walls and trees. But that was not all; countless sharpened blades were also hidden on top of the walls. There were even secret traps installed around every corner. The place was literally a fortress. Then again, it was he who designed its defence plans. After the routine inspection, Stirling sighed in relief: "Unless they bring an army, there is no way anyone can get in."

The Imperial Guards guarding the entrance let Stirling through without raising much hassle. Due to Commander Pi Gu's old age, thus incapable of handling everything alone, most of the Capital's defences were organized by Stirling.

.....

Stirling arrived at the Headmaster's office located dozens of meters underground, and saluted politely: "Master?"

"Stirling is it?" ZiChuan Shen Xing stuck out his head from behind the huge pile of documents. Pushing up his pair of glasses and said: "Please sit."

The current Headmaster of House ZiChuan was 53 years old. Six years ago, his famous and feared brother, ZiChuan Yuan Xing died in battle against House Liu Feng, leaving his only heir, Lady Ning who was only 9 years old at the time. Therefore he was the only logical choice to succeed the seat of Headmaster.

None of his features resembled that of the great ZiChuan Yuan Xing, he was ordinary and boorish. He wasn't tall either, a pair of small eyes and hunchback, even missing a few teeth. Many would have been disappointed merely looking at him. In ZiChuan Xiu's words: "He is a ruler incapable of inspiring loyalty from his subjects."

His political skills didn't change the way he was perceived either. Sure it wasn't terrible, but it didn't really stand out to inspire confidence either. Simply put, there was no awe inspiring aura befitting a Headmaster to be found within him.

He was most commonly described as: An easily bullied, weak old man who only made it to his position by sheer luck.

Yet only Stirling and a few close confidant of him knew: Just how incredible that spark of brilliance hidden between that pair of frail eyes could be...

“I heard from Banner Master Li, that you were looking for me?”

“Yes.” ZiChuan Shen Xing nodded: “Did you have too much to drink last night?”

“I did!” Stirling instantly bowed his head and apologized: “I’m sorry, Master...”

“I’m not blaming you. You are still young. It is good to relax once in a while. Just... it shouldn’t have been now... as you may know, “they” are watching you very closely! I was afraid that they got to you first. You went missing last night; I had to send out two Imperial Guard regiment to look for you... If something really did happen to you, I would have done anything to get you back, even if I have openly turn on Yang Ming Hua.”

Stirling was deeply moved by his words: “Master, I’m terribly sorry. My selfish actions, I... I’m undeserving of your kindness. I would gladly give my life for your cause...”

“There is no need for that. Stirling, I’d rather keep you alive and well.” ZiChuan Shen Xing smiled, and that smile gave his usual plain face an incredible charm.

“Did you meet with ZiChuan Xiu?”

“Well?”

Stirling knew better than anyone of the meaning and its consequences of what he was about to say next: “He is not against us, but he has yet to make his final decision; he is still considering.”

“I see. That is not very smart of him.” ZiChuan Shen Xing stood up and said: “He is my dead brother’s stepson. There is no way Yang Ming Hua would trust him. So why doesn’t he join us instead?”

Stirling stood on the side, not uttering a word. Even though it wasn’t his fault, ZiChuan Xiu was still his best friend. He felt ashamed that he wasn’t able to convince ZiChuan Xiu.

“Keep an eye on him! Stirling, I know he is your best friend, but if he somehow mistaken friend for foe and ended up on Yang Ming Hua’s side... I’m afraid we will have to strike first.”

Chill ran down Stirling’s back, yet he managed to speak: “Yes, Master.”

ZiChuan Shen Xing could guess his thought: “I hope we won’t have to. I’m not looking forward to fight an enemy as powerful as ZiChuan Xiu either.”

“How good is he in a fight, do you know?”

“I only know that ZiChuan Yuan Xing used to teach him some basics of the wave technique, but then he left for the Far East. I don’t know much after that...”

ZiChuan Shen Xing looked serious and said: “He must have another teacher... Ge Ying Xing once told me, that he was able to hold his breath for four hours under the sand, killing two demon commanders in the midst of the demon army. Both top tier demon warriors were killed with one stroke; they didn’t even see it coming, and he managed to escape afterwards unscathed from thousands of demon soldiers. I doubt even my dead brother can raise someone as terrifying as that.”

Stirling remained silent.

ZiChuan Shen Xing changed subject: “What is your opinion on Di Lin’s new assignment? Yang Ming Hua is sending him to the Far East.”

Stirling replied candidly: “I can only think of one thing right now: Yang Ming Hua sending Di Lin to the Far East means that he is not yet ready to openly turn on us. Di Lin is Yang Ming Hua’s close confidant, if Yang Ming Hua was planning to make a move, he would definitely want to have a capable lieutenant like Di Lin at his side. It also means, the moment Di Lin return to Di Du is probably the moment Yang Ming Hua will strike. He hesitated for a moment and continued: “I may be wrong, but that is all I can think of right now.”

“Hmm, good, your thoughts are clear.” ZiChuan Shen Xing smiled: “Just a bit too naïve. Have you considered the possibilities from Yang Ming Hua’s standpoint?”

“Please share your wisdom.”

“We are afraid of Yang Ming Hua making a move, surely Yang Ming Hua is afraid of us making a move. Yet he chose to send away his most trusted lieutenant at a critical juncture such as this... Don’t you find it strange?”

“Ah... Indeed.”

“Therefore, after due consideration, there are only two possibilities explaining Yang Ming Hua’s actions.”

“Do tell.”

“First possibility, Yang Ming Hua has already discovered Di Lin’s true allegiance. He sent Di Lin away to avoid him getting in the way, however that isn’t his usual motto. He is not a patient or merciful man; he would have killed Di Lin. Surely dumping his body somewhere in the moat would have been more satisfying?”

“Then what is the second possibility...”

“Yang Ming Hua has more tricks up his sleeves that we don’t know about!” ZiChuan Shen Xing spoke slowly and clearly: “He definitely has, or else he wouldn’t have acted as carelessly as he did. And this secret person must satisfy three requirements: First, he is good enough of a fighter. Second, he is staying in the Capital. Third, he won’t raise our suspicions... So who can you think of that fits all the requirements above?”

Stirling instantly got nervous, because he already knew whom ZiChuan Shen Xing suspected.

“The timing of ZiChuan Xiu’s return was too peculiar. The moment he got back, Di Lin was reassigned. Other than him, no one else of importance has returned recently...”

“Master.” Stirling spoke resolutely: “I will guarantee with my life, that ZiChuan Xiu would never side with Yang Ming Hua!”

“Stirling, the last time you saw him was three years ago. People change...”

“People do, but ZiChuan Xiu and Di Lin... Master, if any of them betrays us, I will atone by taking my own life.” Stirling answered proudly.

ZiChuan Shen Xing didn’t say anything after that.

Neither did Stirling.

“Very well. Stirling, then you better make haste and convince ZiChuan Xiu to side with us. He is an incredible fighter and the four dozen personal guards he brought back from the Far East are all war-hardened veterans. Despite the small numbers, they are still good in a pinch. They could be a great asset to us. With him on our side, our ‘Lancer’ plan will more likely to succeed.”

“Yes, Master! I will do everything in my power!”

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“A-choo!” In the midst of trying to steal Bai Chuan’s wallet, ZiChuan Xiu suddenly felt the urge to sneeze while he was still in her room: “Who is saying bad things about me behind my back this time?”

“Oh. Hi, Bai Chuan. Are you awake? How lucky... that I’m able to find you in your bedroom!”

“Bai Chuan, come on, don’t look at your commanding officer this way... Let me explain, I’m just looking for the bathroom and it is dark outside. I got lost on my way back, so I went into your room by mistake... It is totally logical!”

“Oh, the wallet I’m holding? Hahaha, there is a perfectly logical explanation to that as well... You’re not thinking I’m here to steal your wallet I hope? Hahaha...”

“Hey, Bai Chuan, you don’t need your sabres. Wait, hold on, I will give you a perfectly logical explanation in a second... Just give me some time to come up with an excuse.”

## General Pervert

Under the influence and active involvements of many, time quickly flew past. Yet, Di Du was as peaceful as ever, like the calm before the storm. Six months later...

The aftershock from the far away Far Eastern region reached the Capital and another brilliant star was born. Di Lin, following ZiChuan Xiu's footsteps, had achieved the second great victory against the Demonic Horde. During the sixth campaign of Heng Chuan, he crushed the invading Demon's conventional Forces, inflicting over seventy thousand casualties and capturing close to fifty thousand prisoners. It was the greatest victory ever achieved since Humans first began this war against the Demons. The most shocking fact of this battle however, was not its glorious outcome, but Di Lin's cruelty – He gave the order to kill all the captives, leaving no one alive.

Upon receiving the report, the Chief of Staff of the Far Eastern Army at the time, Luo Bo was appalled by his act. Racing over as fast as he could, Luo Bo tried to stop the execution. But after he had arrived, Di Lin blindsided him with his graceful welcome while ordering his men to execute the last remaining five thousand captives in secret. By the time Luo Bo realized what Di Lin had done, the dead had already littered the earth. Looking down at the corpses drowning in the sea of blood, Luo Bo closed his eyes in agony and condemned Di Lin: "You bloody devil... You just destroyed everything the seven generations of House ZiChuan had built, fought for and paid in blood over the past two hundred years!" (That was how Di Lin earned his nickname, the Devil)

Di Lin replied defiantly: "I'm building a grand future for House ZiChuan for the next thousand years to come!"

.....

When the news reached Di Du, the whole court was in shock. Due to Di Lin's great achievements in war, being Yang Ming Hua's close confidant and the fact that Yang Ming Hua was the most powerful figure at the time, only few whispers



of dismay were heard and no one dared to file a formal complaint or impeachment, But that didn't stop people talking about it in private of course, even Yang Ming Hua shared his disapproval within his inner circles – “Di Lin was out of line.”

But he didn't even know the half of it, in fact, it was only the beginning. After the battle, Di Lin didn't wait for regroup; he immediately led the two hundred thousand soldiers of the Far Eastern Army in a chase after the retreating Demon forces all the way towards the Demon God Fortress, breaking the eternal status quo of the Far Eastern warfare – Humans defending and Demons attacking. His swift manoeuvre caught the defending Demon forces at the border completely off guard, sending them scattering to the winds. It only further encouraged Di Lin to continue his pursuit.

Everywhere he went, if any none human populated villages, towns or cities dared to resist, he would immediately give the order to massacre its population. Old or young, man or woman, none of it mattered, he would simply kill them all, and then raze the place to the ground in a sea of fire. Most of the time, only smoke and ashes were left in his wake.

Races resembling humans were given a chance to survive this encounter with the dreadful commander... But in order to survive, they had to relinquish everything they owned, provide provisions and volunteer to join his army. Under Di Lin's Iron Fist and harsh military disciplines, none of the half beasts, werewolves, snake men or goblins dared to raise their voice despite their wild nature, afraid of catching Di Lin's watchful gaze.

He did not only rule the none-humans with an Iron Fist, even the soldiers of ZiChuan had to endure his harsh command. The thousand or so riders caught for running away in battle were all sentenced to death and executed in front of the whole army. Over forty soldiers who arrived late this morning were dragged behind a horse for several kilometres and those who fell asleep standing guard were whipped fifty times. Well, it was more like twenty times really, because the soldiers in question were already dead, but the Marshals didn't dare to defy the order and had to carry out rest of the sentence, completing rest of the fifty whips on a corpse.

Under Di Lin's command, no one defied their orders, no one neglected their duties and most importantly, no one dared to cowardly retreat. Whenever they faced Demons in battle, even against the powerful Armored Beasts, Di Lin's forces would not falter. They would face it head on and fight it with spears, sabres and arrows... even if they only had rocks or no weapon at all, with just fists and teeth, they would not retreat. The Demons called them in awe: "Di Lin's forces are all possessed!"

And so his name became the avatar of nightmare and the embodiment of invincibility. The news of his deeds quickly travelled throughout the Far Eastern Regions still under Demon's control. After massacring the four Demon Cities, Glenco, Kazi, Heng Lan and Kashalachi, not a single settlement resisted his occupation again. No matter where his army went, Demon cities would open their gates and welcome him on their knees. The city guards either fled or surrendered...

While wiping out small pockets of Demon resistance here and there, Di Lin's army was also attracting large contingent of non-human forces, boosting their numbers significantly. By the time he arrived at Demon's second major city – Gamara, his forces was already five hundred thousand strong! Since the war against Demons first began, Humans had never launched such a massive offensive, or penetrated so deep into the Demon Territory.

However, in the city of Gamara, he was met with fierce resistance for the first time since the beginning of this campaign. A famous young demon general blessed with royal blood, Yun Qian Xue[1] had stationed his forces of two hundred thousand strong behind the sturdy fortification of the city, waiting to face his enemy...

...

While Di Lin was carving his name on the wall of history, another one of the three famous hero of House ZiChuan, ZiChuan Xiu was working hard and diligently in the Administrative Office.

When his newly assigned and pretty female secretary left the office, Deputy Chief ZiChuan Xiu pulled out a note: "38, 22, 37. One hundred dollar!"

Luo Jie pulled out a note as well: "38, 21, 38. I bet hundred as well!"

Chang Chuan showed his: “37, 22, 38. Hundred. However I think you guys are wrong about her bra size. Based on my many years of experience, I’m fairly certain that she is using bra pads... Don’t forget to ask her about it, Bai Chuan!”

Luo Jie followed: “Right, and her xxx – is hanging a bit low. I’m pretty sure Master Xiu has underestimated it.”

ZiChuan Xiu continued: “Bai Chuan, what are you waiting for? Hurry and go ask!”

Bai Chuan complained: “What excuse do I have to ask for her bust?!”

“Dude, that is super easy... Just tell her you need it for the staff survey.”

...

Bai Chuan rolled her eyes in disgust at the perverts, then went outside and came back, announcing: “38, 22, 37!”

ZiChuan Xiu shouted joyously: “I won! Pay up!”

Chang Chuan grudgingly pulled out his wallet: “What the hell, how can I be wrong?”

Luo Jie: “Damn it... boring. What do we bet on next, Sir?”

Counting the bills, ZiChuan Xiu felt satisfied: “Money smells the best... How about we bet on if she is a virgin next? I bet one hundred that she is not!”

## Love and War

“Ah, this is the perfect life of a Commander I have always dreamed of!” ZiChuan Xiu inspected satisfyingly at the luxuriously decorated office. A majestic desk (with expansive wine and porn mags secretly stuffed in the draws), a comfy leather couch and a pretty secretary wearing mini skirt he could shout orders at: “Get me that decade old diary from top of the cabinet!” When she climbed up the ladder, he could raise his chins and enjoy the view in peace... You know, men. There is no need to explain!

And the workload was light... Clearly ZiChuan Xiu, the Deputy Commander was not being taken seriously. Most of his daily work included counting how many chairs and tea cups each regiment had, and where the windows broke in need of repair *etc.* Even though Station Chief Ge Shan didn't give ZiChuan Xiu any work of importance, at the very least, she didn't discriminate and make his life difficult.

ZiChuan Xiu sighed in relief: “This is paradise!”

Suddenly, certain elements unbefitting his paradise appeared in the corner of his eye.

“Luo Jie, Bai Chuan, Chang Chuan. Why are you in my office?”

“Huh, Sir. Did you forget? We are your assistants!”

“That is not what I meant... Don't you have your own offices, why are you...”

“Forget it, our offices are small and old, and there is no sunlight!”

“Yeah, and no air conditioning either!”

“My secretary is uglier than the mother of all demons... Sir, have you seen the movie “After midnight” yet? If not, you don't even need to go to the cinema, just come around at my office and check out my secretary.”

“Also, they don't even provide Coca-cola!”

“Sir, you know what it is like. We are Banner Masters. Back in the Far East, a

Banner Master is a title commanding over thousands of men!”

“But here, we are being treated worse than the refugees!”

.....

ZiChuan Xiu felt a little bit sick: “Hold on.... Then why is Lady Ning here as well?”

ZiChuan Ning replied calmly: “Well, I’m here as the heir of House ZiChuan, to inspect the Administrative Office. Is there a problem? Deputy Chief ZiChuan Xiu?”

“Why is Princess Ka Dan with you then?”

“Brother! Now you’re being selfish. How can we leave a little girl alone back at home when we are all outside having fun? She would get lonely. Don’t you feel ashamed? Doesn’t your conscience bother you?”

“But people would talk seeing all of you gathered in my office...”

“Oh, Commander Xiu, you don’t have to worry about that!” With that said, Ka Dan pulled out a sign from her bag saying: “Chief in Conference, please do not disturb.” And hanged it on the door. “You just have to tell them that Deputy Chief has to be in conference seven days a week. Everyone would praise you for your dedication!”

“This is hell!” ZiChuan Xiu howled in despair.

“Xiu, what hell are you talking about?” Stirling suddenly arrived at the doorstep, smiling: “Sorry for barging in on your conference!”

“Welcome!” Everyone quickly stood up and welcomed him, only Ka Dan didn’t move from her chair.

.....

Ever since that day they parted ways, Stirling would pay Lady Ning a visit on a daily basis. It was obvious, everyone quickly figured out the reason for Stirling’s frequent visit, which was not because his close friendship with Master Xiu. Besides, the person of interest, Stirling didn’t try to hide his intention either. Whenever he visited Lady Ning’s place, he would scan around like a hawk, till he finds Ka Dan, only then would he calm down as if he just took a weight off his

shoulder.

Luo Jie used to lament about it to Bai Chuan: “Look at Sir Stirling. He is like a high-school kid falling in love for the first time... He must have a screw loose somewhere.”

Bai Chuan would then reply: “We all understand the idea. Yet in the end we are all slaves of love, no one can escape it.” And lose in thought...

However, the person of interest number two, Ka Dan did not seem to be affected by Stirling’s affection. If he visited, it was fine, and if he left, that was fine as well. She treated him just like anyone else. She didn’t push him away, nor did she welcome him with open arms.

Stirling was a well-known figure in the Capital City – Di Du. Something like this could easily become a wide spread gossip if not for ZiChuan Xiu’s heavy-handed intervention. He threatened every servant in the house and men under his command: “If you value your lives, then keep your mouth shut!” Even to Lady Ning, he played a card he rarely used before, as her brother, he warned her not to send words to Li Qing. Only then did the gossips stay contained within Lady Ning’s mansion.

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Trying hard to keep a straight face, everyone watched Stirling drifting into the room. Chang Chuan sitting next to Princess Ka Dan immediately stood up and said: “Sir, here please sit!” Stirling bluntly accepted his invitation and sat down, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Even the usually thick-skinned ZiChuan Xiu had to applaud him for his shamelessness.

“What is everyone talking about?” Even though Stirling said everyone, in his eyes he only saw Ka Dan.

Ka Dan remained silent. ZiChuan Xiu replied for her: “Talking about Di Lin’s war situation in the Far East!” As he handed over the newspaper.

Stirling had already read it before, but he pretended to read it for the first time, muttering “I see” while reading, as though the news was actually interesting. Several minutes later, he asked: “So what is everyone’s opinion on this matter?”

“We all believe, that Di Lin is in danger.” Luo Jie raced to answer, hoping to give his Idol a good impression: “Deep behind enemy lines with no help on the way, now facing a powerful enemy ahead, unable to inch forward.”

“Right, is that your opinion as well, Xiu?” Stirling eyed ZiChuan Xiu. The two shared a look and instantly, they knew what the other one was thinking.

ZiChuan Xiu spoke softly: “Nope. I think at a time like this, Di Lin holds the initiative of the battlefield.”

Stirling concurred: “I agree!”

“Why” Several voices questioned at the same time.

ZiChuan Xiu smiled: “You only see that in front of Di Lin, in the city of Gamara two hundred thousand Demons led by the famous Demon General Yun Qian Xue awaits. With an impregnable fortress in the way, Di Lin has no choice but to attack, and has no choice but to fail. Correct?”

Stirling followed up: “But what if, Di Lin decides to not to attack Gamara, what happens then? What if he turns around and attacks the weaker city of Yi Ka to the southeast? Once he conquers Yi Ka, Di Lin will be able to make contact with Deputy Commander Lei Bang’s border army situated to the southeast, and will no longer have to worry about his supply lines. At the same time he could isolate almost five thousand square kilometres of Demon controlled territories, which they could swallow at their leisure...”

ZiChuan Xiu continued: “If Di Lin does not attack the city of Yi Ka, he could move towards the Guo Sen plains to the northeast. Conquering the Guo Sen plains means cutting off Demon’s supply of magic crystal stones and land dragons, and with the magic crystals and dragons he seized, he could build a large contingent of magic wielding dragon riders of his own, which will make Demon’s life even more difficult.”

Stirling nodded: “Even if Di Lin doesn’t attack Guo Sen either, he could choose to use his number superiority to surround the City of Gamara and wait for Yun Qian Xue’s two hundred thousand Demons to surrender by starving them out.”

A wave of silence later, Bai Chuan questioned: “But all those possibilities hinged on one key element, Di Lin’s army’s supplies has to be able to reach him

constantly. If his supply line gets cut off, he cannot possibly fight a prolonged battle. Right now the supply line already stretches thousands of kilometres deep into Demon controlled territories. How can he secure it?”

ZiChuan Xiu and Stirling shared a look, both cracked a wry smile.

Stirling spoke discreetly: “It is a tough problem to solve for someone like you and me, but for Di Lin, it is not a problem at all. Perhaps that is the difference between a capable general and an average one.” His voice was filled with unspeakable bitterness.

ZiChuan Xiu smiled wryly: “It has nothing to do with your ability. It is merely a difference in perspective. You don’t have to apologize for yourself.”

Everyone looked confused, turning their gazes at ZiChuan Xiu and hoping he would explain.

ZiChuan Xiu sighed and spoke only a few words: “Take everything you come across, that solves all the supply problems.”

Everyone suddenly understood: The reason Di Lin could afford a prolonged engagement was because he would send out many raiding parties, to rob everything the towns, cities, villages in the vicinity of everything they have. He would not let his soldiers starve. Which means, if Di Lin could hold out for two months, then Yun Qian Xue stuck inside the City wouldn’t even manage three weeks.

Ka Dan cried out: “Then what about our people? Do they deserve to starve?”

All the officers of House ZiChuan in the room turned away from her, unable to meet her sharp gaze. Only Luo Jie murmured a few words: “Casualty of war...” But nobody heard him.

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“That felt bloody awful.” When ZiChuan Xiu and Stirling were the only ones left in the room, ZiChuan Xiu lowered his voice: “I lost track, I totally forgot Ka Dan was one of them.”

Stirling sighed.

ZiChuan Xiu continued: “If it was anyone else, I would have had thousand of



reasons to refute them. Like the way Demons treated us in the past several hundred years? This isn't even enough to cover the interest! But when I saw the look in her eyes, I couldn't say a word..."

Stirling sighed again.

"But really, Di Lin is making a huge mess in the Far East, who is going to clean it up?" ZiChuan Xiu went on: "He just cares about what is convenient for him. Killing all the prisoners like that, who would dare to surrender to us in the future? They would all fight to the death. Besides, killing civilians, robbing them of their livelihood, I just can't get behind that ... Without its people's support, how would we ever establish ourselves in the Far East?"

Stirling had no words, he could only think of Di Lin's imperious and courageous voice: "We don't need the support of those low-lives. We only need their obedience and for them to fear us! In the end, the reason we control the Far East is not because of public elections, but the sword in our hand!"

Stirling didn't truly agree with Di Lin's cruel policies in his heart either, but Di Lin was the eldest of the three sworn brothers. ZiChuan Xiu, the youngest could complain if he wanted, but as the middle one, it was not his place.

He sighed yet again.

"Hey, Stirling. Don't keep sighing like a nagging old hag. Say something."

"So what is new, I mean here in Di Du."

"Nothing surprising. Just Yang Ming Hua denying Ming Hui's Border Army for receiving the latest equipments, and as usual, the new equipments ended up in the hands of Lei Xun's Central Army. The second thing is that the Station Chief here, Ge Shan had a huge argument with Luo Ming Hai about it, she complained that Yang Ming Hua shouldn't have violated the regulations. Historically, new equipments are always allocated to the Border Army first. I'm having trouble determining which side that old virgin is on."

"Oh, really? Looks like I can put some work on her, perhaps I can win her over."

ZiChuan Xiu frowned at Stirling and gave him a strange look.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

“Bloody pervert, can’t you just keep it in your pants for once? Even if you really like Ka Dan, you don’t have to be so damn obvious about it. I’m afraid that... I can’t keep it under wraps for much longer!”

Stirling had no words.

“Does Li Qing know?”

“She has doubts. She suspects that I have another woman somewhere. But she doesn’t know who.”

“Ouch. A woman’s instinct is seriously scary! She went through Lady Ning asking me to help her spy on you. I used every trick in the book to reassure her, but next time it won’t be so easy. So what does Ka Dan say?”

“You saw it for yourself. No reaction! She never gave me the chance to be with her alone...”

ZiChuan Xiu cursed: “What a cunning witch! In my opinion, you should just be straight with the Headmaster. If he is ok with it, then no one else can interfere. You won’t have to hide it then either!”

“I will, just not now... Yang Ming Hua would never let any opportunity slip if he could hurt us. In worst case, he could force me to resign. Besides, I don’t want to bother Headmaster with my personal affairs.”

“You are right.”

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ZiChuan Xiu took a closer look at Stirling’s face. It had lost some weight, leaving his cheekbones more exposed and his eyes deeper in its sockets. He didn’t understand how his friend could suffer so much in the name of love yet was able to pretend as if nothing happened while dealing with all kinds of military assignments and plotting against Yang Ming Hua every day...

He had great sympathy for Stirling, but most importantly, he admired his perseverance. He even thought: “If it was me, I wouldn’t be able to do it. Luckily I’m not as foolish either. What is love? Screw that! There are more than enough pretty ladies walking about in the halls of the Grand Hotel of Di Du. Which one of them is not as pretty as an angel? They only cost three hundred a night, why

would you bother with love?"

## Storm is coming

Imperial Calendar, winter of February, the war in the Far East had reached another turning point. While Di Lin's army formed the encirclement around the City Gamara and Yun Qian Xue's two hundred thousand Demons, new enemies appeared deep within the Demon territory. Leading two hundred thousand imperial guards, second Demon Prince, Ka Lan had come to Yun Qian Xue's aid. After a few short skirmishes, Di Lin had realized that the adversary he now faced was not one he had faced before. Both the morale and combat prowess of the Demon Imperial Forces greatly surpassed that of the regular regiments, and they were loyal to a fault. Fearing the possibility of being pincerred from both end, having to fight a winter war which the Humans are not accustomed to, and the increasing difficulties with gathering supplies, Di Lin immediately made the decision and gave the order to retreat.

Due to Di Lin's orderly retreat and his superior numbers, very little opportunities were left for Ka Lan and Yun Qian Xue. Neither of them dared to give chase recklessly. Instead of calling it a chase, it was more accurate to describe it as an armed escort. The chase continued all the way back to the contested border of Heng Chuan, restoring the original frontier and put an end to what would be known as "The First Great Invasion" that lasted over six months.

During this campaign, House of ZiChuan suffered total fifty one thousand and three hundred deaths, and eleven hundred and six thousand wounded. (Of all the casualties, thirty thousand deaths and over eighty thousand wounded belonged to the non-human warriors forcibly conscripted into Di Lin's Army).

Demons on the other hand, had suffered two hundred and seventy three thousand deaths, and two hundred and eighty eight thousand wounded. (Out of all the deaths, over hundred and fifty six thousand were captured prisoners). Those were merely the military casualties.

According to House ZiChuan's Military Historian, Tang Chuan's research:

during the First Great Invasion orchestrated by Red Banner Master Di Lin, total five major Demon Cities, seventy two towns and over two hundred villages were massacred and razed. The final count of non-human civilian casualties suffered at the hand of Di Lin's Army (Mass massacred or died indirectly from starvation and cold caused by Di Lin's brutal gathering methods) reached over 1.8 million. (Later many Historians argued that Tang Chuan's statistics were overly conservative, believing that his research was not conducted objectively. Clearly Tang Chuan was under House ZiChuan's payroll at the time, and thus had the motives to be biased towards Di Lin.)

The entire western border region of Demons was mercilessly purified by Di Lin's blade; even a hundred years would not be enough to restore what was lost. As result, their hatred for Human-kind had also reached an unprecedented height. Despite House ZiChuan's effort to improve the livelihood in the region in the days after their successful conquest of the entire Far Eastern Regions many years later, the animosity between the races could not be quelled. Only till much later, when the King of Light, ZiChuan Xiu made his return to the Far East, did the many non-human races start to re-establish their connections with humans again...

As of right now, Di Lin was praised as the new War of God of House ZiChuan, the first general since the days of Ya Li Mei. Though at the same time, many called him a cold blooded monster, butcher, or king of murderer...

Meanwhile, he himself returned to the Headquarters of the Far Eastern Army in Fort Warren without a care in the world, and was awarded with a medal for his efforts and a new commission as the Deputy Commander.

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Imperial Calendar, Year 779, Eleventh of March. Supreme Commander Yang Ming Hua, as the representative of the High Command, advised Headmaster ZiChuan Shen Xing the following: "Deputy Commander Di Lin and his men fought long and bravely, their efforts and merits should be rewarded. We propose to transfer Deputy Commander Di Lin and the fifty thousand men under his command who had distinguished themselves during war back to the Capital for their awards."

Twelfth of March, Headmaster ZiChuan Shen Xing gave a short reply: “Approved.”

Nineteenth of March, Di Lin received his new orders. Taking fifty thousand soldiers who had “distinguished themselves” with him, he left Fort Warren and began his glorious march to the Capital.

Inside the secret room of the High Command, with a smug look on his face, Yang Ming Hua slowly enjoyed a glass of wine and spoke to Luo Ming Hai: “The moment Di Lin returns... You will be the new Supreme Commander.”

Noticing the slight hint of jealousy coming from the Central Army Commander – Lei Xun, Yang Ming Hua spoke calmly: “Don’t worry. You are the next one in line for the seat of Headmaster.”

Luo Ming Hai’s reaction was merely a dispassionate nod, as he said: “Thank you for your generosity, Sir!”

Lei Xun on the other hand, responded excitedly: “I can never repay the kindness you have bestowed upon me, Sir! However, it is my humble opinion that we are more than capable of finishing the job. We don’t have to wait for Di Lin! That brat is too arrogant and unpredictable...”

Yang Ming Hua laughed cheerfully: “Lei Xun, are you jealous? There is a reason I requested for Di Lin’s transfer. You don’t have to worry about it. He will yet prove to be useful... Hahaha.”

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Inside the House of Headmaster, ZiChuan Shen Xing spoke bitterly to Stirling: “Yang Ming Hua has ordered for Di Lin’s transfer, he is about to make a move.”

Stirling questioned back: “There is one thing I don’t understand, if Your Excellency wishes to share your wisdom. Given their current military strength in the Capital, Yang Ming Hua has full control of Lei Xun’s Central Army; he vastly outnumbers us and has the absolute advantage. Why is he wasting time waiting for Di Lin’s forces to return to the Capital? What is the point?”

ZiChuan Shen Xing smiled: “Stirling, what day is it today?”

Stirling couldn’t quite figure out the meaning of ZiChuan Shen Xing’s question,

thus he gave him a straightforward answer: “Twentieth of March, Tuesday.”

“Next Monday, is the annual Military Assembly of House ZiChuan, almost all army officers with the rank of Banner Master or above will have to attend, including Ge Ying Xing. He will have to return to Di Du as well.”

“Sir, are you saying that, the reason Yang Ming Hua requested for Di Lin’s transfer is to deal with Ge Ying Xing?”

“Exactly! Ge Ying Xing will bring his six thousand personal guards, but Di Lin will have fifty thousand men with him. Almost ten to one, he wants Ge Ying Xing dead.”

“Such bold move, isn’t he afraid that it would cause the Far Eastern Army to rebel?”

“He won’t have to worry about that because by then, Ge Ying Xing would already be dead. Even if his subordinates, like Luo Bo or Lin Bing complained, the ones involved are all soldiers from the Far Eastern Army. Yang Ming Hua could easily cover it up saying it was an internal conflict inside the Far Eastern Army, and no one will be able to connect it to him. In the worst scenario, he could always sacrifice Di Lin to quell the anger from Ge Ying Xing’s subordinates. How is that for a perfect plan?”

Stirling smiled: “He is too clever for his own good!”

.....

Inside the House of ZiChuan Ning, she spoke to ZiChuan Xiu: “Brother, I heard Di Lin is coming back with an army of fifty thousand strong! ...What are you looking for?”

“Oh, I’m looking for the bill for the stuff we broke during our last duel. Clearly he should be the one paying for them; why the hell do I have to pay?! It’s a huge sum, over seven thousand, and another six months of interest...”

“Ning, do you think I should give him the official interest rate or the black market interest rates? I mean we are friends for many years after all, I guess I shouldn’t use compound interest...”

“It is not like he can’t afford the extra interest. I heard he robbed the Far

Eastern Regions clean... leaving the poor Demon villages with nothing but tears...”



# Love

“Sir.” Guard Captain Cobra handed Di Lin a letter: “Just got it from the mailbox.”

Di Lin opened the letter, revealing only one sentence: “xpsspnpulsbqmbusuofd.” He gave it a look and nodded. Captain Cobra knew better and dismissed himself.

“What is it? What letter is so important? It came as soon as you returned to the Capital.” Lin Xiu Jia, his beautiful and gracious wife approached his side. Di Lin planned to hide the letter, but it was too late.

“A love letter?” Lin Xiu Jia asked mockingly.

Di Lin’s icy cold cheeks smiled in a way that was rarely seen: “You are the only one I love.” And handed her the letter.

“I was kidding. You are always like this, no fun at all!” Even though she complained, she couldn’t be happier on the inside: “Is it about work? I don’t think I should look at it.”

“It is fine. Between us, there is no secret.”

With that, he instantly melted her heart. She was so glad that she agreed to marry Di Lin back then. It was the best decision she ever made: “Luckily I chose him...”

Di Lin was young, handsome and talented. Given his position of prominence in the army, countless ladies were captivated by the Red Banner Master’s aloof charm. (He is now a Deputy Commander). But all of them were met with an icy mountain, a mountain made of Di Lin’s cold demeanor and calm, keeping them a thousand miles away. It was a common saying amongst the young misses in the Capital: “Di Lin was an impassable mountain of ice!”

“Too bad they never saw the other side of him when he is at home.” Lin Xiu Jia smiled pleasantly. Is there another husband out there who still loves his wife as much as he does after two years into the marriage? Everyone says that marriage

is the graveyard of love, but in her eyes, this is the paradise, because she married an almost perfect husband...

Almost, the only flaw was the position he found himself in, an extremely dangerous secret identity... and the cause of her constant worry...

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“xpsspnpulsbqmbsoofd.” “What does it mean?”

Di Lin explained to her: “It is a simple substitution cipher, try substituting each letter with the previous one in the alphabet.”

“worromotkraplartnec...” “It still doesn’t make sense!”

Di Lin gave her a naughty wink: “Try reading it in reverse.”

“Central Park tomorrow... Oh, I get it. Someone is asking to see you tomorrow in the Central Park!” Seeing the way Di Lin smiled, she leaped into his arms and pushed against his broad chest: “You are mean! You are making fun of me again!”

Instantly, Di Lin was on his feet, pulling up his sleeves in anger and glanced around him: “Who?! Who dares making fun of my wife? I will kill him!”

Lin Xiu Jia laughed happily at the sight of his act.

Di Lin sat back down again, holding Lin Xiu Jia gently in his arms: “Like I said, surely my wife is the smartest of them all.”

Lin Xiu Jia felt a wave of happiness wash over her... but then a question popped up in her mind: “Who sent the letter?”

“Oh, just an idiot who thinks he is being clever!” Di Lin revealed another gentle smile, together with his usual cold demeanor, it was surprisingly charming.

“ZiChuan Xiu!” Lin Xiu Jia guessed the name right away.

Di Lin smiled again: “I’m glad. We both think alike!”

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In truth, ZiChuan Xiu’s extracurricular measures were mostly useless. If the letters were to fall into Yang Ming Hua’s hand, his cryptographic experts would

solve a basic cipher like this in less than a minute. But it was in ZiChuan Xiu's nature to do pointless things. In his words: "This is how you do things in secret!" and thus he insisted that all exchanges between him, Di Lin and Stirling had to be encrypted. And they weren't allowed to use the same encryption either, sometimes shifting one letter in the alphabet, sometimes two, and sometimes the cipher even included highly sophisticated form of algebra...

In the end the real victims of the whole ordeal were Di Lin and Stirling. Every time they had to go to great lengths in order to decipher the unreadable gibberish. Sometimes even after they finally deciphered the code, its content would appear to be simple messages like:

"It is quite sunny today... I ate too many watermelons; my stomach is making noises."

"There is a new waitress at the Heaven's Dream tavern, super hot, just a bit uptight."

"Stirling, the money I owe you, can I get a three month extension?"

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Lin Jiu Jia seemed a bit agitated: "Him again, is he asking you to do something dangerous again... I don't understand. Aren't the three of you supposed to share the burden together, why do you have to be the one to go undercover? You keep saying that he is your friend, but every time you are the one taking all the risks..." Di Lin's face was cold as ice; she instantly knew the look and stopped herself.

Di Lin stared motionlessly at the thick clouds covering the blue sky through the window, calm as ice.

Lin Xiu Jia didn't dare to utter a sound. She knew his husband, even though he loved her deeply and would do everything she asked, there was a place hidden deep in his heart so sacred, that she could never reach.

After a long while, Di Lin sighed: "ZiChuan Xiu and Stirling are not my friends... They are my brothers. I didn't hear what you just said."

Lin Xiu Jia lowered her head obediently: "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

“It is alright, just that...”

Di Lin couldn't finish the sentence; he kissed her lightly and said: “You should rest.”

Only after Lin Xiu Jia's shadow disappeared from his study, did Di Lin mutter the rest of the words he wanted to say but couldn't: “Just that you don't understand what we have been through... I guess it is hard to explain to a woman, what it means to be brothers!”

# Purple River - Chapter 4

## Bloody

“This is incredible!” Luo Jie was amazed by the impressiveness and solemnity of the Conference Hall. As a Banner Master, Luo Jie attended the High Ranking Military Conference of House ZiChuan for the first time. The place was simply magnificent, and was designed to provide space for over a thousand high ranking officers and more. Top notch red carpet, walls filled with hundreds of lively sculptures, the roof was so high and together with the countless crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling like stars in the nightly sky, it was a sight to behold.

“How big is this place?” Bai Chuan asked Stirling sitting next to her at the table.

Stirling smiled back: “I have no idea. But there was a legend, saying that a Banner Master once came here with his whole infantry division. That Banner Master was late, and by the time he got here, he couldn’t find anyone. So he left. The next day, his subordinates told him that his entire Division, over three thousand men stood at the left corridor of the hall, waiting for him...

“Yo!” Chang Chuan called: “That banner in the middle... the handsome looking one... Who is that long haired idiot in the large portrait?!”

“Watch your mouth! That is the founder of the house, His Excellency ZiChuan Yun!”

“Huh? Where did Master Xiu go?”

“Master Xiu, why are you cowering in the corner?”

“Oh, I thought I could pry some the decorative gold from the wall, but they were surprisingly well fitted...”

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ZiChuan Xiu looked around; the conference had yet to start. Over a thousand high ranking officers were spread around the hall, chatting or casually taking a walk. He turned to Stirling: “Isn’t your Imperial Guard on security duty today?”

Stirling smiled: “You really think Yang Ming Hua would leave the security of this place to me? The constables from the Ministry of Supervision are the ones in charge of the security.”

ZiChuan Xiu nodded. Inspector General – Xiao Long had always maintained neutral. He is the only one both parties would be able to accept if put in charge of the security.

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An officer greeted ZiChuan Xiu as he approached: “Long time no see, Xiu!”

ZiChuan Xiu turned around: “Sir De Lei, it has been a long time indeed.”

De Lei was the Deputy Commander of the Black Banner Army. They fought side by side six years ago during the counter attack against House Liu Feng. Smiling, De Lei introduced his son, Banner Master De Ke to ZiChuan Xiu: “This is my kid, De Ke. It’s his first time being invited to a place like this. He still has much to learn from Sir Xiu and Sir Stirling.”

De Ke was pretty much still in his teens, with barely any beard growth around his lips. He seemed a little bit shy and introverted. He quickly gave ZiChuan Xiu and Stirling a military salute, but didn’t quite know the right words for the occasion, so he cracked a simple, but honest smile instead.

Stirling commended: “Such a spirited lad, I’m sure he has a great future ahead of him!”

ZiChuan Xiu gave an evil grin: “He is quite a handsome devil isn’t he; almost as good looking as I am. Sir De Lei, are you sure he is yours? I have my doubts!”

De Lei laughed: “When we remove that silver tongue of yours, we will have rid ourselves of most of the wickedness in this place!”

“Most? Where is the rest?”

“Well, you will have to ask our most honourable Supreme Commander for that!”

They each gave the other a knowing smile, before De Lei excused himself to talk with the other high ranking officers.

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The bell rang and the conference began. On the podium sat the six commanders: Luo Ming Hai, Ge Ying Xing, Lei Xun, Fang Jin, Ming Hui and Pi Gu. But the seats of Supreme Commander and Headmaster remained empty. It had been a long time since Headmaster ZiChuan Shen Xing last attended a major conference, and thus no one really expected him to be here this time either.

On top of the podium, Yang Ming Hua appeared on time, but what started both ZiChuan Xiu and Stirling was, that he showed up together with Di Lin who sat down somewhere in the middle. Di Lin had returned, but he had yet to make contact... Their eyes met, and they both could sense the worry brewing in the other's eyes.

Yang Ming Hua went and took the seat below the great portrait of ZiChuan Yun, the one reserved only for the Headmaster of the House. He was smiling, as if that was the most natural thing in the world.

A wave of uneasiness spread across the hall. Many high ranking officers stared at Yang Ming Hua in disbelief as the same thought surged through their mind: Has he gone mad?

ZiChuan Xiu whispered to Stirling: “He is paving the path for his coup!”

“Yep!” Stirling said: “At the same time, he wants to find out if anyone dares to oppose him!”

Suddenly, the door at the main entrance opened wide and Headmaster ZiChuan Shen Xing's shadow appeared behind it.

The air in the conference hall was immediately replaced by a cloud of uneasiness as all the officers could see how ZiChuan Shen Xing's body quivered at the sight of the open provocation. Yang Ming Hua on the other hand, was very

calm and had no intention of ever standing up... The awkward silence seemed would last for an eternity.

A kick against the floor later, ZiChuan Shen Xing turned around and went back out of the door.

Almost everyone let out a sigh in relief, counting themselves lucky that no conflict arose on the spot, that the hollow peace could continue its course and that they weren't forced to pick a side then and there...

Stirling's tightly clenched fist shook violently... "He should be ashamed if his master had to worry, and he should die if his master was put to shame." **[1]** He would not stand for the humiliating insult directed at his Master; he would die if it means the death of Yang Ming Hua... But a firm hand was placed in time on his shoulder, keeping him at bay. ZiChuan Xiu's spoke with a calming voice: "Stay alive, you have much to do still!"

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Yang Ming Hua began his speech: "Fellow officers, let's begin the annual High Ranking Military Conference..." As if nothing had happened, he announced the opening statement.

"Sir Supreme commander, I'm sorry, but I think you are sitting on the wrong seat..."

Everyone instantly turned their head towards the source of the disturbance – it was a shy young Banner Master still in his teens. Both ZiChuan Xiu and Stirling were shocked... It was De Lei's kid, De Ke.

"Oh." Yang Ming Hua gave him a frown: "I don't think we have met; I'm sitting on the wrong chair you say?"

It was De Ke's first time speaking in front of such audience, and criticising a figure of authority no less... His anxiety made his words come out in a stutter: "I'm De Ke, Banner Master from the Black Banner Army... I'm not trying to criticize you Sir; I meant nothing by it... I'm sure it was just an honest mistake... But in my humble opinion, you should make way for the Headmaster, Sir. In the end, rules are rules..."

His father, De Lei got on his feet almost instantly and scowled at him: "De Ke,



are you mad? What are you even saying?! Apologize to the Supreme Commander and sit back down!”

“It is fine. Banner Master – De Ke. I know you mean well, but please do not interrupt the proceedings again. This is a very serious occasion!” With that, Yang Ming Hua gave Di Lin a look; his intention was clear and terrifying at the same time.

“Of course! I would like to apologize for my intrusion earlier...” De Ke apologized hurriedly with his reddened cheeks... He didn’t even know why he had to apologize... I...”

He was not allowed to finish, as a narrow long blade pierced his youthful, warm and broad chest with lightning precision, and it was retracted just as fast, leaving a trail of blood in its wake. He watched dumbfounded at the mark of blood slowly expanding across his chest. When he looked back up at Di Lin, who slowly wiped away the blood staining his blade, De Ke’s eyes widened in disbelief of what he just saw... and then, from where he stood, he fell... even then his dilated pupils were still so full of youthfulness and yearning...

His Father, Deputy Commander – De Lei roared in anger as he leaped towards Di Lin, but before he could even take a single step, a heavy palm landed on his back, sending blood gushing from his lungs. “Bam.” He dropped to the floor; he probably wouldn’t be alive for much longer. Lei Xun somehow made his way next to him, and thanks to his Storm Technique, the blow was fatal.

Shouts exploded throughout the hall; officers couldn’t believe what they just witnessed. Yang Ming Hua’s men openly executed two of their fellow officers, De Lei and De Ke, two high ranking officers of House ZiChuan!

A few Officers from the Black Banner Army instantly rose to their feet...

“Boom!” Thunder boomed across the Conference hall, temporarily stunning everyone caught in the blast. Lei Xun stood proudly in the center; his body acted like the eye of the storm as air swirled around him, spinning faster and faster. Those who stood near him couldn’t even keep their eyes open, even less remaining on their feet. Not even the locks could bear the terrifying pressure, “Bang,” and the entrance doors were blown wide open. Yet, even more shocking, it made him float in midair. Looking down from above, his intense

killing intent quickly engulfed the entire hall, and that was the peak form of his powerful Storm Technique.

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Stirling murmured to himself: “Not bad for the number one warrior of House ZiChuan!”

ZiChuan Xiu twitched his mouth to one side: “Yeah, he is more like a fan. The way he hangs in midair, let’s call him a ceiling fan from now on!”

Every officer present was overwhelmed by Lei Xun’s display of force, and unable to retaliate.

Yang Ming Hua stood high up on the podium, scanning the faces in front of him with his imposing gaze, as if he was trying to find out if there was another idiot who would step up and oppose him... But no one dared to look into his threatening eyes, not even ZiChuan Xiu or Stirling, as they averted their eyes unconsciously...

“So when brutality reaches a certain peak, it could become a form of authority.” Stirling’s mind was in pain, the look of that young lad’s widened eyes the moment he died kept reappearing before him. He would not rest in peace. “Di Lin, how could you?!”

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“Good, let’s proceed.” Yang Ming Hua declared.

And there was silence.

Yang Ming Hua smiled in satisfaction, thinking: Bunch degenerates, if I don’t scare them a little, they just may forget their place!”

“Next...”

“I object!” A feminine voice interrupted his speech.

“I accuse Far Eastern Army Deputy Commander – Di Lin of premeditated murder against Black Banner Army Banner Master – De Ke!”

“I accuse Central Army Commander – Lei Xun of premeditated murder against Black Banner Army Deputy Commander – De Lei!”

“I accuse Supreme Commander Yang Ming Hua being the mastermind of both of these cold-blooded murders. He must be held responsible!”

“I, Banner Master – Bai Chuan and assistant at the Administrative Office, bring my accusation to the Inspector General – Xiao Long. I will take full responsibility for all my actions!”

Bai Chuan’s clear and due to her nervousness, slightly trembling feminine voice echoed in the silent conference hall.

Over a thousand brave men were gathered at the Annual High Ranking Military Conference of House ZiChuan, and all of them were to put shame by the courage and integrity of a young woman.

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The conference took place on Imperial Calendar, Year 779, March 26th. That day, would forever be known as the “Bloody Night of Di Du”. The river of blood flowing in the Conference hall would soon rejoin the great sea later that night, drowning everyone who stood in its way...

House ZiChuan’s hundred years of heroism and anguish, would begin its first chapter that crimson night.

## Before the bloodshed

Suddenly, Inspector General – Xiao Long’s next step could very well decide everything.

Not because he held an important position: He was House ZiChuan’s seventh Commander, a position that was above the other six.

Not because he held great powers: He was in charge of the internal affairs, and was not under the direct command of the High Command led by the Supreme Commander – Yang Ming Hua.

And definitely not because he was fair, just, revered or respected by everyone in House ZiChuan.

The only reason being that at the time, the four thousand constables in charge of the security were all under his direct command! Whichever party he chooses would instantly gain several thousand fully armed elite forces to their side. If a conflict did break out, there was no way someone could withstand the onslaught even if they were the best fighters in the world.

Not to mention the fact that all the officers present had to go through security before the Conference, and were disarmed. In other words, it gave them even less of a fighting chance against the well armed, well trained constables who held a significant number advantage in the first place.

Every single pair of eyes was fixated on Xiao Long sitting in the front row, wondering how he would react to Bai Chuan’s accusations.

Stirling’s face turned pale; he already knew which side Xiao Long was on – How did Di Lin get inside with his blade?

Xiao Long’s solemn expression was like an iron mask, in the face of all expectations, he began slowly: “No murder has taken place; there is no need for an investigation. Case dismissed.”

The murder took place right in front of him; the blood hadn’t even dried. Yet

he claimed there was no murder! He couldn't have made it clearer; everyone knew which side he was on by now. So apparently no one was killed.

Yang Ming Hua was furious with Bai Chuan. He couldn't care less about grace or manners at this point. Everyone else had clearly given up, except one stupid bitch who didn't know her place. He gave Di Lin another look.

Di Lin replied with a grin and began pacing in Bai Chuan's direction. The tragedy that befell Banner Master De Ke was about to repeat itself.

ZiChuan Xiu, Luo Jie and Chuang Chuan instantly rose to their feet and came to stand between Di Lin and his prey.

Seeing ZiChuan Xiu, Di Lin hesitated and halted his steps, unsure of what to do next.

Stirling on the other hand focussed his attention entirely on Lei Xun, making sure that he wouldn't be able to ambush his friends like he did before.

Small distance away, Xiao Long shouted the order. A party of fully armed constables rushed into the Hall and surrounded ZiChuan Xiu, Stirling and their men, holding them at arrow-point.

Bows were drawn; arrows were notched. The situation could turn violent at a moment's notice!

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Suddenly, Ge Ying Xing's gentle voice sounded from afar: "Inspector General – Xiao Long says that there is no need for an investigation – I disagree. In fact, I think we should get to the bottom of this! So I suggest we vote on it. Those who think we should start an investigation, please raise your hand!" With that, Ge Ying Xing not only raised his hand, he even stood up on the podium.

The way he said it was very clever. He only asked everyone to vote on whether they should "start an investigation" or not, and did not directly accuse Yang Ming Hua of "the murder". This way he had given Yang Ming Hua a way out, instead of pressuring him to make a move.

The officers from the Far Eastern Army instantly raised their hands in support. They had resented Yang Ming Hua for what he did for a long time. They didn't

come out and say it before because they lacked a voice that would bring them together, but now with Ge Ying Xing's backing, there was nothing holding them back.

Far Eastern Army was the biggest armed forces of House ZiChuan, which meant a big portion of the officers rose to their feet in an instant. Even Yang Ming Hua was caught off guard by it.

Border Army Commander Ming Hui sitting on the other side of the podium cracked a wry smile while looking at Yang Ming Hua: "I agree with Sir Ge Ying Xing's opinion!"

Black Banner Army Commander Fang Jing stood up almost immediately without saying so much of a word. He was in a terrible mood. Then again, the ones killed were all Black Banner Army officers; they were his men, so naturally he was furious.

Even Imperial Guard Army Commander Pi Gu, whom everyone thought was dull-brained, got up on his trembling feet in protest!

Suddenly noises erupted in the hall, almost everyone had stood up. Every single pair of eyes filled with anger fixated on Yang Ming Hua standing on top of the podium... His outrageous behaviour had angered the mass! Amongst all the officers standing up in protest, quite a few were even from Yang Ming Hua's own force, the Central Army.

The only ones still sitting on the podium at this point were Yang Ming Hua's close confidants: Lei Xun and Luo Ming Hai.

Facing them, was a great ocean of fury.

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At where ZiChuan Xiu stood, countless officers from the Far Eastern Army, Black Banner Army, Border Army, Imperial Guard Army and many more whom he knew or didn't know had come to their aid. Even though they had no weapons, they stood fearlessly in the way of the constables, blocking their arrows with their bare chests. Out of nowhere, a multi-layered wall made of flesh and bone surrounded Bai Chuan, separating her from the constables. The indignation in their eyes provoked the sword wielding constables in silence: come, come! Shoot

me if you dare!

Facing the sudden outrage, even the usually disciplined elite forces, the constables of House ZiChuan were forced back.

Stirling was moved to tears. He turned to ZiChuan Xiu: “Justice is in the heart of the people!”

ZiChuan Xiu replied sarcastically: “Right... Justice is like a scared little girl... It only appears when there are many of us. I have yet to see any Justice showing up all by its lonesome.”

Facing the ocean of fury and for the first time, Yang Ming Hua realized how insignificant he really was. He angrily signalled Xiao Long with a gesture of moving his wrist around the neck. His meaning was clear – Kill!

But Inspector General – Xiao Long had other things on his mind: This was no longer a small matter involving a few officers from the Far Eastern Army and the Imperial Guard Army. If he moved against a thousand high ranking officers from every regiment in the realm, who represented the entirety of the armed forces of House ZiChuan, the outcome would be unthinkable, and the inevitable reprisals would be even worse. Even though the world was a vast place, as the one solely responsible for all the bloodshed, there would be no place for him to hide. Besides, there were many capable fighters present amongst the thousand officers here. His constables might not necessarily win the bout... All in all, it was a lose-lose situation eitherway..

He sighed in defeat as he gave the order, telling every Constables to fallback and he himself left with them.

The hall exploded in a roar of joy and a voice shouting: “Yang Ming Hua – Be gone!”

Several hundred more voices instantly answered in unison: “Yang Ming Hua – Be gone!”

Yang Ming Hua’s first instinct told him to find out who it was shouting those words, expecting to frighten him with his presence, but all he saw was the same kind of faces, fearlessly staring back at him with fire in their eyes.

Turning his gaze towards the podium, Yang Ming Hua saw Ge Ying Xing smiling

mockingly, as if he was enjoying the public outrage directed at him. Ming Hui denied him even that, turning his head away from him; Fang Jing's eyes were filled with rage. Even Luo Ming Hai, who was usually calm and collected, revealed a hint of uneasiness. Only Lei Xun came up to him and whispered: "Sir, We still have the Central Army! You have our undying loyalty!"

Yang Ming Hua nodded. Clenching his teeth, he grudgingly left the hall. Lei Xun, Di Lin and Luo Ming Hai quickly followed suit.

Cry of joy exploded everywhere! Everyone leaped to celebrate as if they had just defeated Yang Ming Hua, forgetting that he still held the Central Army of hundred seventy thousand strong and the entire Capital City under his thumb.

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Only until everyone came out of the Conference Hall did everyone take notice: numerous parties of soldiers roamed the street, fully armed, and all carrying the banner of the Central Army. The usually quiet and serene streets of the Capital were suddenly shrouded in a thick mist of killing intent.

The riders from the Civil Police could be seen everywhere, putting up posters: "The High Command has declared martial law! A curfew is now in effect until further notice. All citizens must remain indoors after eight o'clock. Any violators will be punished by death!"

Onlookers scattered left and right; the Capital was on the brink of war...

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Under the protection of a large regiment of Personal Guards, Ge Ying Xing approached ZiChuan Xiu and Stirling: "Stirling, Xiu, I'm leaving for the Far East, Fort Warren tonight. Do you want to come with me?"

ZiChuan Xiu and Stirling gave each other a look, and spoke with determination: "No Sir. We will stay."

Ge Ying Xing wasn't the least surprised. He had expected as much, extending his hand to the both of them: "Tonight, many heads will roll in the Capital. Take care of yourself!"

ZiChuan Xiu and Stirling held tightly onto Ge Ying Xing's fragile but warm



hands; they could feel the warmth spreading through them. Yes, it was Ge Ying Xing who saved their lives once again. That weak sickly little man was the real cornerstone holding the family together. He was irreplaceable! Now he had to return to the Far East, not for his fear of losing his own life, but to take control of his army so he could better oppose Yang Ming Hua's forces. For the same reason, ZiChuan Xiu and Stirling chose to stay; they all did what they did out of loyalty for the House ZiChuan!

"Sir, you have a long and dangerous journey ahead of you. Take care!" ZiChuan Xiu spoke with all the sincerity in his heart.

Stirling wanted to express his gratitude as well: "Sir, I owe you my life. I have no way to repay the kindness you have shown. Please be safe!"

Ge Ying Xing smiled: "We will meet again. I'm sure of it!" His eyes turned to Bai Chuan standing beside them: "She has been incredibly brave... It's your duty to keep her safe!"

Bai Chuan was already in tears, the sheer volume of emotions had overwhelmed her. She could only bow to Ge Ying Xing as deeply as she could, in order to show how grateful she was for what he had done.

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Seeing Ge Ying Xing's forces slowly leaving, ZiChuan Xiu asked Stirling: "Where are we going now?"

"Central Park, to see Di Lin!" Stirling answered, but his gloomy expression said it all.

Di Lin had been waiting for them, seemingly losing his patience.

Sensing Stirling's anger from miles away, Di Lin stole the initiative and spoke first: "If you were in my position, what would you have done?"

Both Stirling and ZiChuan Xiu froze; they had no answers.

"My only way out at the time was to kill that noisy Banner Master, or Yang Ming Hua would instantly suspect me, and all our efforts would have been for naught."

"We were standing right there in the middle of it, between you and Bai Chuan.

Why didn't you kill us as well? That way you can proof your loyalty to Yang Ming Hua even more!" Stirling taunted him.

Di Lin sighed: "For my safety and for everyone else's safety... He simply had to die!"

Stirling refuted sarcastically: "You mean for your own personal gain... you could kill just about anyone, even the ones loyal to the Family!"

Di Lin replied without hesitation: "As long as my life is at stake, I would kill the whole world!"

Neither of them could bear to look each other in the eye, both turning away in anger: "Tch!"

Even ZiChuan Xiu was at a loss, unsure which one to side with. His rational mind told him that Di Lin did what he had to, but all his emotions were telling him otherwise; it was simply hard to accept the nonchalant way Di Lin acted after killing an innocent officer in cold blood.

He could only try to downplay the situation: "Enough, this is not the time to fight amongst ourselves. Stirling, there is nothing you can say right now to bring him back. But if you insist, we can bring flowers to his grave and honor his sacrifice every year."

ZiChuan Xiu then turned to Di Lin: "It is entirely your fault. Yang Ming Hua told you to teach De Ke a lesson. You could have stabbed his legs or even his butt you know, why the hell do you have to stab him in the chest?!"

Both Stirling and Di Lin laughed uncontrollably.

Di Lin sighed in defeat: "I could kill the whole world... except you two." For someone as arrogant as Di Lin, that was his way of saying sorry. In fact, the three of them often fought over matters in the past, it was always Stirling who won the argument while the other two surrendered, because Stirling was always standing on the side of just and truth."

"So what is the situation?"

"I brought fifty thousand soldiers from the Far Eastern Army with me. They will only answer to me. If I tell them to kill, even if it was the god himself, they would

not hesitate. They are currently stationed outside the walls!"

"Is your army allowed inside?"

"Nope! Lei Xun's Central Army is in charge of City's defence. He won't let us in without a valid reason. In fact, Yang Ming Hua has already ordered me to chase after Ge Ying Xing and his guards!"

Stirling seemed disappointed: "If they can't get in... then they are no use to us. Or can they force their way in?"

Di Lin lost his patience: "You want to try fight your way into a heavily fortified Capital City with only fifty thousand men?! The Central Army alone is hundred seventy thousand strong!"

"Wrong, they can be of use to us!" ZiChuan Xiu revealed a mysterious smile: "I have an idea, what do you think?"

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"No wonder everyone says Xiu is the biggest pain in the ass!" Di Lin nodded satisfyingly: "As expected from the most cunning bastard of House ZiChuan!"

Stirling hesitated: "But this plan clashes with His Excellency, ZiChuan Shen Xing's Lancer plan, and it is very risky, the chance of success isn't very high either..."

"Fuck that! What is the point of holding onto a plan that won't work? We are all going to die tonight. A shred of hope is better than none at all!"

"Fine." Stirling had made up his mind: "Then let's fuck them up!" Stirling rarely resorted to vulgarity, but today he would make an exception.

Di Lin continued "The moment the last light of the sun dims, when the Central Army locks down the city gates... That will be the moment of truth!"

Everyone instinctively turned towards the sun; the reddish glow of the sunset had engulfed the entire City in a shade of bloody crimson...

Stirling declared resolutely: "It is a good omen... The righteous shall prevail!"

Di Lin smiled coldly: "Whose blood I wonder, will paint the street of Di Du in red tonight?"

ZiChuan Xiu murmured: “I don’t know whose blood it will be, but it won’t be mine. I’ve anaemia; I don’t have that much blood for them to paint the street with! Though I did hear Yang Ming Hua suffers from high blood pressure...”

# Assassination

“I assume everyone understands... the gravity of our current situation...” In the Mansion of ZiChuan Ning, ZiChuan Xiu had gathered Luo Jie, Bai Chuan, Chang Chuan and the rest of his men.

Everyone nodded undoubtedly, showing their understanding of the situation.

“If I vow to be Supreme Commander – Yang Ming Hua’s enemy... Which side would you choose?”

Luo Jie: “We don’t really have anything against Supreme Commander – Yang Ming Hua...”

Bai Chuan: “But considering the fact that he is your enemy, Sir...”

Chang Chuan: “So naturally and without a doubt, we would...”

The three spoke in unison: “Support the Supreme Commander and bring death to ZiChuan Xiu!”

“I have had enough of your shit; it is finally time for payoff!”

“That is right, I don’t care if it was Yang Ming Hua; I would gladly go to hell if it means that I can get my revenge on you...”

“We won’t hesitate for a second even if we have to sell our souls to the devil!”

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“I understand, but let’s not be hasty... I will give everyone the freedom of choice. I will turn around and count to ten. Those who do not wish to stand by me may exit through the door. I won’t hold it against you. If after I count to ten, and you are still here, then it means you have decided to follow and support me with the absolute conviction... Hey... Luo Jie, What are you running for? I haven’t even started counting yet. Common man, at least I deserve that much?”

“Fine, I’m starting to count: One, Three, Five, Six, Eight...”

“Hold on, stop. You are counting too fast... and you are skipping counts. I

haven't even had to chance to run yet! Again!"

"One, Two, Three..."

"Huh, Chang Chuan, I can't get the door open!"

"Four, Five..."

"Shit, that bastard has barred the doors!"

"We can't get out... He never intended to let us out in the first place!"

"Seven, Eight..."

"Bai Chuan, hurry and get the master key!"

"I left it in my room... We are almost out of time. Luo Jie, you are a big fellow, just kick it open!"

"Luo Jie, hurry or it will be too late... He is going to get the better of us again!"

"Nine..."

Bang! (Luo Jie smashed against the door)

"Ouch, what are these doors made of?! It didn't even move!"

"Ten!"

ZiChuan Xiu turned around explaining: "They are made of materials used for security vaults... I see that everyone is still here. I'm really glad... They say one can only tell who his friends truly are when the situation is most dire... And given the threat we now face, I can safely say that everyone's loyalty to me is beyond reproach. I'm touched... I feel I'm about to cry..."

ZiChuan Xiu wiped his nose.

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"Sir." The secretary knocked on the door into Commander Lei Xun's office: "Deputy Commander Di Lin has requested to see you."

"Ok, I understand." Lei Xun wasn't too happy hearing the name. Di Lin was but a callow brat, yet he had somehow gained Yang Ming Hua's favor. Just because he won a few battles against the Demons, he now thinks he is better than everyone else. Rising to the position of Deputy Commander at the age of barely

over twenty, who knows, perhaps he would surpass even him...

Lei Xun glanced at the time; it was already seven PM. Another hour from now, the curfew would be in effect, and the attack on the House of Headmaster would commence... Coming here at this hour, what could Di Lin want?

“Let him in.”

Di Lin walked in to the office, and gave Lei Xun a polite salute. The lack of his usual arrogance made the whole thing more tolerable for Lei Xun.

“Di Lin, do you know what time it is? Shouldn’t you be doing what you’re supposed to do?! Why are you here?” (Lei Xun meant that Di Lin was supposed to go kill Ge Ying Xing.)

“Well, Sir. Let me explain. During my campaign in the Far East against the Demon Horde I have managed to acquire certain assets, and I want to give them to you as a tribute, to show my appreciation.”

Lei Xun’s stressed cheeks were instantly relaxed and his voice became gentler as well: “Oh, you’re being too kind, Commander Di Lin. You didn’t have to.” (Everyone knows you have stripped the Demons bare of their riches in the Far East, leaving no stone unturned in the process. So of course you are bloody rich!)

“But I’m a commissioned officer, it’s not proper for me to accept such a gift!” (You better not waste my time by bringing me some worthless magic stones or gems... I won’t take your leftovers!)

Di Lin cajoled Lei Xun with all the flatteries he could muster: “Sir, I have always admired your infinite candor! But these meager gifts were originally meant for you anyways, so please grace me with the honor and accept this tribute!” He whispered to Lei Xun’s ears: “This is not something you see every day. It’s something I took from the Demon Nobles during the Siege of Ga... something. I assure you it is worth a fortune!” Di Lin’s lips curved into a flattering smile.

(He sure knows his way around the politics!) “Well, Commander Di Lin, you are being very persistent... You should know that I never ever accept any gifts (Because they were too cheap) ...Very well, I will make you an exception, just this once. So what is so special about this one? And again, there won’t be a next time!”

Di Lin gave a mysterious smile: “Of course, Sir. Would you allow my servants to carry it in here? They are waiting outside.”

Lei Xun quickly gave the order to the Guards to let them inside.

Two soldiers with their hats pulled down moved in with an iron box the size of half a man, Lei Xun pondered: “So big, what could it be? Diamonds? Gold? Rare magical Items...? Looking at the amount of effort they are putting into moving that thing; it has to be heavy...”

The box was lifted onto Lei Xun’s desk; Di Lin’s quietly closed the office doors behind him, then slowly unlocked the locks on the iron box. He smiled: “There is only one way to find out, Sir.”

Lei Xun eagerly opened the box but was left stunned... The box was completely empty.

He looked at Di Lin in an alarming fashion: “You...”

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The shocking turn of event.

The soldier standing on his left suddenly reached for his sabre, and there came an attack aimed for his neck... an attack without any finesse or sophistication, the only exception of it being fast! Faster than sound, faster than lightning, faster than anything he had ever seen! But the truly frightening part of it all was that it came without warning. Without any sudden movement and in the blink of an eye, the razor-sharp blade was already at his neck, as though it had materialized in thin air!

Lei Xun was a capable fighter, but against a deadly move like that, his reflex was all he could rely on... Shifting his body to his right, he instinctively raised his left hand in an attempt to block the incoming attack.

Slash, his left arm was severed at his wrist, slowing the blade slightly, but it still cut deep into the artery below his neck.

Almost at the same time, the soldier on his right struck Lei Xun lightly above his right shoulder... so gently that he almost couldn’t tell he was struck, until the paralyzing sensation began to spread from the point of impact, and in an instant,



it extended to the rest of his body. Nearly all of his blood vessels, nerves endings and even his breath were numbed, frozen. The little bit of Qi[1] he managed to gather in a desperate attempt to retaliate was sealed shut as well... how could someone's martial art be this overbearing? In the moment between life and death, Lei Xun could only think of one name... if it really was Stirling, then his death was almost a certainty, but at the very least, he could alarm those guarding outside... Lei Xun channelled every last bit of his remaining strength, and cried out...

But all he felt was the coldness of steel stuck between his throat, unable to utter a sound... Di Lin's lightning strike had pierced his vocal cord and cut off his air.

The last image Lei Xun saw before the fuzziness took over was Di Lin standing before him with a blood soaked blade in his hand, grinning and gloating. In that moment he realized something: the whole thing was oddly familiar, as if he had seen it happen once before...

The number one fighter of House ZiChuan, the mighty Commander of the Central Army – Lei Xun, gaped with his eyes wide open, and died where he stood... As to whether he realized the reason of his death would forever remain a mystery to all...

The entire assassination took place in under a second... Only after the fact did his left wrist, which was cut off by ZiChuan Xiu, hit the ground. Bam.

ZiChuan Xiu retracted his sabre and Stirling took a step back. They were both veterans of war; they had killed before... But killing in such underhanded fashion and by outnumbering their opponent, left them slightly... Anyways, they didn't feel too comfortable looking into Lei Xun's pair of wide eyes!

Di Lin on the other hand, looked as if nothing unusual had happened. Wiping the blood of his sword against the deadman's coat, he jested: "And he calls himself the number one; it was no different than slaughtering a lamb... Just look at him, I can tell he didn't die a happy man!"

Stirling whispered: "Justice! Deputy Commander De Lei and Banner Master De Ke will finally rest in peace."

"Hey, Stirling, can you not curse me like that... You know I killed De Ke, and

saying he is going to rest in peace, are you suggesting...”

Stirling gave him a harsh look but kept his silence: the death of the boy would forever remain a thorn in his heart...

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ZiChuan Xiu listened against the office door for any movements. He then turned to the others: “They haven’t noticed us yet.”

Everyone was relieved at the sound of that. They were in the Central Army Headquarters, and they had many capable fighters amongst them. If Lei Xun had made any sounds at all, or even the smallest hint of struggle was heard outside, no matter how skilled they were, they wouldn’t have been able escape with their lives.

The rest was easy: First, they dumped Lei Xun’s body in the iron box, then they cleaned up the blood – this part was the easiest, thanks to Stirling’s Freezing Breath[2], Lei Xun’s blood was frozen solid before he could bleed out. Next they pried open the hidden drawer in Lei Xun’s desk to find the central army commander’s seal... There were a large sum of cash and jewelleries hidden inside the drawer as well, and naturally, a certain someone wouldn’t mind liberating them for the greater good, but Stirling stopped him: “Don’t! We didn’t kill Lei Xun out of vengeance... what you are doing is an insult to our cause!”

ZiChuan Xiu respectfully replied: “Of course.” And returned everything back to where he found them... while pocketing half of the spoils in secret.

And so the trio walked out of the office, head held high and an iron box in their hands. Not even once were they stopped for questioning... The way Di Lin arrogantly walked in front of the pack; no one was stupid enough to get in their way.

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The moment they left the Central Army Headquarters, the trio felt like a weight was lifted from their shoulders. Only then did they realize the sweat had already soaked through their thick uniforms.

The streets were eerily quiet, with barely any pedestrians walking about. Clearly the time of curfew was drawing near.

“We will have to act separately from now on!”

Stirling felt uneasy as he studied ZiChuan Xiu: “Your task will be the most dangerous of all. How about you take over the command of the Imperial Guards, and let me...”

Di Lin nodded in agreement: “I also think Xiu is taking too much of a risk... Let me instead. I’m Yang Ming Hua’s close confidant, they won’t suspect me...”

“No need!” ZiChuan Xiu turned to Stirling: “Second Brother, you are the heart of the Imperial Guards. Yang Ming Hua will attack the House of Headmaster tonight... They need you there!”

“And you Big Brother, the fifty thousand soldiers of the Far Eastern Army will only answer to you... You cannot be replaced.”

“Therefore, I’m the only one capable of accomplishing this task.”

“Big Brother, remember: the red lamps are our signal! The moment you see three red lamps being lit atop of the city gate, ride through the gate and bring them hell!”

The trio joined their hands: “See you tomorrow!” A rather common phrase to say goodbye, but every one of them here had a dangerous mission filled with uncertainties ahead of them. Will the three brothers really be able to watch the next sunrise together?

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Stirling couldn’t bear it any longer: “Xiu, do you have anything you want me to say to Lady Ning? She has always... you know...”

ZiChuan Xiu gave it a thought: “Yes, I do...”

“Tell her to stop wearing those miniskirts. She is too skinny; they don’t look sexy on her at all. Also, tell her to make me some of that egg porridge tomorrow morning when I get back... and this time, more eggs, not just some rice and water. I’m a big boy you know... Hey, Brothers, where are you going? I wasn’t finished! Tell her to give me back the porn mags she took from me, or I will get really upset this time! I’m serious...”

# **Purple River - Chapter 5**

## Peace

According to the Book of Records, despite all the tragedies that took place during the Night of Di Du's bloodbath, it really did only last one night.

On the morning of the second day, Di Lin's order had appeared on every notice board in the Capital.

"Haven't you had enough fun yet? Get your ass back before noon! -Di Lin, March 27th."

Many of the historians were often also expert linguists, and they all believed there were a lot of historical inaccuracies in regard to that order. First, it was the lack of a clearly defined subject. Who was "you" supposed to be in the sentence? And how can you get your "ass" back? Second, morning was also a very vague statement. When does "morning" start? Does he mean today's noon or tomorrow's noon, or some other date next year? Also, what does he mean with "fun"?

Either way, they were in overall agreement that the erroneous and counterproductive poster was the irrefutable proof that Di Lin did not take his childhood education seriously. He had to have skipped classes on a daily basis when he was young. In other words, if Di Lin had taken his childhood education more seriously, and had learned the proper morality and ethics, he probably wouldn't have become the ice-cold killer that he was. So the final conclusion was that the teaching of Civil Morality had to take place when one was still young...

Still, as it turned out, before twelve o'clock midday, the vast majority of the Far Eastern Army had already reported back to camp. They knew all too well that their commanding officer was not someone you could argue semantics with. When the clock had hit one in the afternoon, all the regiments had gathered and made the head count.

Guard Captain Cobra led the forces personally and patrolled the streets. Whenever he saw any Far Eastern Army soldiers still out there having "fun", regardless what their reasons were, (Didn't see the notice boards, misread the message, didn't understand the order or simply lost track of the time.) he would hang them on the spot.

After two o'clock, Stirling's Imperial Guards also joined the peacekeeping force. Together they caught a band of robbers trying to take advantage of the chaos.

The order of the city was mostly re-established in the same afternoon.

Many people never understood how a famous general like Di Lin could openly allow his men robbing and killing innocent civilians. There were many ongoing theories, but the young historian – Tang Chuan's theory was most believable:

"Di Lin simply had no choice. He commanded his army with an iron-fist. If he didn't provide them some occasional release, like looting or other opportunities to get rich, his men would have rebelled a long time ago! His army had always been the most spirited, most capable, and most loyal (Well, in this case they were only loyal to Di Lin, not to House ZiChuan) of all House ZiChuan's armed forces. It was the ever victorious Army!

The only downside was, the cost to create such an army, and it was simply too expensive... more expensive than the House could afford.

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After the rebellion was crushed, ZiChuan Shen Xing's first task was to award the officers accordingly based on their respective merits in war. The result however, was a series of questionable personnel changes.

Former Chief of Staff – Luo Ming Hai was promoted to the Supreme Commander. When ZiChuan Xiu first heard of the news, he whispered to ZiChuan Ning: "It was probably a better idea to bring back the Buddha statue from the Temple and make it the Supreme Commander instead, either way you won't hear a thing from them, ever. At the very least, the Buddha's smile is more pleasant to look at than Luo Ming Hai's stupid face."

Former Deputy Commander of the Imperial Guard – Stirling was promoted to Acting Central Army Commander. He would be responsible for reorganizing and restructuring the Central Army.

That was the only personnel change which everyone approved. Stirling had earned his promotion. Everyone expected him to fully take charge of the Central Army, and not just being the Acting Commander in the near future.

Next up was the one personnel change everyone had problems with. After the order was re-established, countless accusations of Di Lin openly encourage his subordinates killing innocent civilian had flown into the Ministry of Supervision. Di Lin, as the newly appointed Inspector General was forced to settle several thousand cases against him every day for a week. It made his finger arthritis even worse.

It was however, not without upside. His hideous handwriting since childhood had seen great progress over the course of the week, to the point it could even be considered as art. Though, of course, it was limited to a few words: “Case Dismissed – Di Lin.”

Knowing the blood feud between Di Lin and Luo Ming Hua, that particular personnel change made everyone question ZiChuan Shen Xing’s true motive: Was he trying to pit his subordinates against each other on purpose, so they could keep each other in check and make it easier for him to control them? Or... then again when you saw his senile appearance, he really did not look much like a master politician. Could it perhaps be an honest mistake?!

Either way, during Luo Ming Hai’s inauguration ceremony, Di Lin who was supposed to make an appearance as the next Inspector General was absent, while during Di Lin’s inauguration ceremony, Luo Ming Hai had showed, albeit with inextinguishable flame of hatred burning in his eyes. Everyone had thought it was short of a miracle that he didn’t try to kill him there and then.

Ministry of Supervision was responsible for overseeing all administrative offices. Its usual relationship with the High Command could be boiled down as: One day of healthy discussion, one day of arguing, one day of shouting, one day of fighting, and three days of peace. Now however, everyone had expected it would turn in to a weeklong fighting, nonstop. Most of the staffs working at the High Command and the Ministry of Supervision had already prepared themselves for the possibilities of potential health hazards; some even went as far as to make a serious investment in life insurance coverage.

As per Luo Ming Hai’s request, due to the overwhelming workload concerning civil restorations after the rebellion, and the lack of capable and experienced staff, ZiChuan Shen Xing had approved the reinstatement of the former Chief of Civil Affairs – Ge Shan, allowing her to atone for her mistakes.

The former Deputy Chief of Civil Affairs – ZiChuan Xiu however, had let his little merits during the rebellion overcome his common sense. Given his questionable loyalty and lack of insight, he was found guilty on the charges of insubordination and showing sympathy for the rebels. (What merits do you think you have anyway? Other than spending your night drinking away with the Central Army Rebels? Do you really think you could have killed Lei Xun on your own? How dare you anger the Headmaster? Your crimes cannot be forgiven!) However, since both the Inspector General – Di Lin and the Acting Central Army Commander – Stirling spoke on his behalf, the great benevolent Headmaster had decided to overlook this once. ZiChuan Xiu shall be removed from the active duty and reassigned to the Army Reserve, effect immediately. Everyone knew being in the Army Reserve meant you had less power than a dog on active duty.

Sadly, it also meant that ZiChuan Xiu had to say goodbye to his extravagant office, the expensive furniture and that gorgeous female secretary with the mini-skirt. What pained him the most was – the question of whether his beautiful secretary was in fact a virgin or not would forever remain a mystery...

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Following his demotion, on an afternoon and in ZiChuan Ning's house:

Bai Chuan: "What the hell?! Why are we being reassigned to the Army Reserve as well?"

Luo Jie: "This makes no sense. We didn't ask to pardon the rebels!"

Chang Chuan: "Sir, can you ask around for us? Is this a mistake? I heard Sir Stirling is now in charge of restructuring the Army. Can you perhaps get him to pull some strings for us?"

ZiChuan Xiu pondered: "But... asking for personal favour is an expensive business. Neither my integrity or personal honor would stand for such act..."

Bai Chuan: "Fuck off! It is not like you had any integrity or honor in the first place!"

Luo Jie: "Consider the fact that we have served you truthfully for so many years. Please, Sir..."

Chang Chuan: "Please, Sir. We can even pay you for it!"



ZiChuan Xiu: “Now you are putting me in a difficult situation! It is not about the money you see, even if you were to put a brief case full of cash in front of me right now...”

Before he could finish his sentence, the trio had already put every last cent they had saved up over the years onto the table.

“I mean even if Bai Chuan was willing to kiss me right now and not slap me right after...”

Just now, ZiChuan Ning appeared at the doorstep, and ZiChuan Xiu immediately added: “I wouldn’t have taken advantage of the situation, of course! My integrity wouldn’t allow for such underhanded act! Those who would take advantage of a damsel in distress are the ones I hate the most! Anyways, I will take your money and see if I can pull some strings! But no promises, I heard there is a reform going on aimed at combating corruption...”

The trio expressed their sincere gratitude.

“It is all right, Sir. As long as you are willing to help, we are grateful regardless of the outcome!”

“Sir, we will be eternally grateful!”

“Sir, thank you!”

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Later that night, ZiChuan Xiu was having dinner with Stirling at a local restaurant.

“Xiu, regarding your reinstatement, I will talk to the Headmaster in a couple of days when he is in a better mood.”

“I don’t care. I don’t mind being in the Reserve. I like the quiet life.”

“Right, Xiu. What is going on with your officers? Why did they all volunteer to be assigned to the Army Reserve? When I made the personal changes, I really thought it was such a waste of talents.”

“Oh, long story. Luo Jie’s haemorrhoid was acting up again, Chang Chuan was having a midlife crisis and Bai Chuan was having her period.”

“That is really unfortunate. They are all very capable officers, especially the girl, Bai Chuan! She was very brave. I wanted to make her the new Red Banner Master in the newly restructured Central Army, but since they made the request themselves... I guess I have no choice.”

“I know right. They are one of a kind. We played cards together for so long, even though they lost every time, they still haven’t figured out that I was a cheat. Where else am I supposed to find idiots like that? If they really had left, I would probably die of boredom... Besides, I don’t really want to take Ning’s money.”

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The truth was, despite being Civil Servants, both Luo Ming Hai and Ge Shan were quite capable in their own rights. They had proven to be extremely effective and efficient in organizing the series of restoration efforts needed in the aftermath of the calamity. (Like providing aid to victim’s families, cleaning up the streets, rebuilding the houses, offering care to those in need.) In conjunction with the great contribution Stirling had provided to Di Du’s security, within merely three days, Di Du had managed to revive from the ashes of the catastrophe befalling it. The order was restored, the city had begun to heal, and the lives of the civilian continued where it left off.

Just when the city of Di Du celebrated the end of the disastrous days, on Imperial Calendar, Year 779, April 1st, the news everyone thought was the April fool’s day prank, struck everyone like a lightning bolt:

“Far Eastern Army Commander – Ge Ying Xing had fallen.”

Imperial Calendar, Year 779, March 28th, Commander Ge Ying Xing had left Di Du for the Far East. Around approximately three hundred miles from Fort Warren, in a place called Yellow Stone Mountain, the former Deputy Commander of the Far Eastern Army – Lei Hong, took Yang Ming Hua’s bribe, lay in wait with thirty thousand of his elite forces and ambushed Ge Ying Xing. After a bloody battle, Ge Ying Xing was heavily wounded and his six thousand personal guards were almost completely annihilated. In the end, a few hundred surviving guards gave their lives helping Ge Ying Xing escape the encirclement, but alas,

due to the serious nature of his injuries, he passed away soon after he reached Fort Warren.

The City of Di Du was shocked by the dreadful news. Ge Ying Xing was one of the most senior officers from the times of the former Headmaster – ZiChuan Yuan Xing. Despite his incredible list of achievements and the immense power he held, he always remained his humble self, and had never acted recklessly. As the Commander of the Far Eastern Army, he was in charge of all the daily affairs concerning the Far East. The amount of wealth passing through his coffers numbered in the hundreds of millions, yet he could remain honest, not taking a cent extra. He led a simple and modest lifestyle. (While the like of Di Lin or ZiChuan Xiu, would take couple hundred thousand from the spoils of every battle.) He had always been strict to himself, compassionate towards the others. However, the most impressive thing about him was his unwavering loyalty to the House. With his sickly body, he kept Yang Ming Hua at bay for over six years. Both the army and the nation held him at high esteem!

When Ge Ying Xing's body was transported back to Di Du, the grieving crowd waiting at the side of the road had spread to the end of the horizon. The tears of millions of followers had soaked through the white marble staircase. People of Di Du were angry, and they had spoken: "Cut the traitorous Lei Hong to thousand pieces!"

The state funeral of Ge Ying Xing lasted for three days. During his memorial service, Headmaster ZiChuan Shen Xing announced that Commander Ge Ying Xing's remains shall be placed in the "Hall of the Holy Spirits", the Imperial gravesite reserved only for the former Headmasters of the house. It was the highest honour to ever bestow upon an officer. In the entire history of House ZiChuan, forget Commanders, not even any Supreme Commanders were given such honour.

When Headmaster read the opening words of his eulogy, he could barely finish the first sentence before he burst out in tears. He kept on repeating: "The hero has returned, he has returned..." And then he fainted. On purpose or not, it had won him a great deal of goodwill from the people.

That day, the sound of tears had deafened both the inside and the outside of the memorial hall.

Together with ZiChuan Xiu, Bai Chuan came to the memorial service as well. Even though she had only seen Ge Ying Xing once, she could never forget how he had saved her life. She could still remember so vividly his worried gaze, his sickly frame and the warmth of his hands... She had already sobbed her way through several handkerchiefs.

Just then, she noticed something very peculiar: Standing beside her, ZiChuan Xiu did not shed a single drop of tear. In fact, he was furious; his eyes were filled with ice cold hatred. One could feel the chills coming from him miles away.

Tracing after his icy gaze, she found ZiChuan Shen Xing standing on top of the stage, reading his eulogy in the Memorial Hall.

Bai Chuan shivered at the sight; he had always thought Di Lin was the only one capable of such menacing look.

“Sir, don’t keep all your emotions to yourself, it is better to let it out.”

“ ... ”

“Sir, take it easy, don’t overexert yourself. I promise you we will get that traitor – Lei Hong!”

“ ... ”

“Sir? Are you all right?”

ZiChuan Xiu slowly opened his mouth; his every words screamed murder: “A grave injustice was done to Sir Ge Ying Xing. He will not be able to rest in the afterlife!”

With that, he stood up and gave Ge Ying Xing’s portrait a deep bow. Ignoring the others and the ongoing memorial service, he turned around and left.

His actions had offended many. “Ungrateful brat!” they called him, saying: “Sir Ge Ying Xing had saved his life several times, and he couldn’t even be bothered to stay around for his memorial.”

ZiChuan Xiu's unexplainable behaviour on the Memorial Day had always bothered Bai Chuan. Ge Ying Xing was a loyal servant to the house. He fought as hard as he could, and died from an ambush. Why did he say a grave injustice was done to him?

The question had bothered her for as long as she could remember, until many years later when she met the young Historian of House ZiChuan – Tang Chuan.

When she mentioned what had occurred that day to him, Tang Chuan had an answer ready almost immediately: “It is obvious. The fact that Yang Ming Hua managed to bribe Lei Hong couldn’t possibly have escaped Luo Ming Hai’s notice. He was his most trusted advisor after all. Yet, somehow no one had warned Ge Ying Xing of Lei Hong’s betrayal. Clearly, it was ZiChuan Shen Xing’s idea. After the death of Yang Ming Hua, the balance of power was broken. Ge Ying Xing, who had the support of the army and the people, had naturally become a thorn at ZiChuan Shen Xing’s side. And thus, a loyal servant of the house, who gave everything he had for the greater good, Ge Ying Xing died at the hand of the one he had sworn to serve. If not injustice, what else do you call it? Did none of you notice at the time? You must be kidding. It was pretty obvious...”

Bai Chuan had no answer, but she did realize one thing: “The one playing the game is often lost, but the one observing sees it all.”<sup>[1]</sup>

.....

The day the news of Ge Ying Xing’s death reached Di Du, High Command immediately gave the order for retaliation, requesting the other two Deputy Commanders of the Far Eastern Army, Lin Bing and Luo Bo to go after the traitor – Lei Hong.

In truth, before the order was even given, on the same day Ge Ying Xing passed away and without Far Eastern Army Staff Officer – Luo Bo’s consent, the enraged Deputy Commander Lin Bing was already in pursuit of Lei Hong’s rebel forces.

Lei Hong’s original plan was to kill every last one of Ge Ying Xing and his personal guards, leaving no witness behind. That way he could openly accept new “Headmaster” – Yang Ming Hua’s promotion, and become the next Commander of the Far Eastern Army.

He never once doubted the success of Yang Ming Hua’s coup. The reality however, did not agree. Not only did Ge Ying Xing survive the ambush, Yang Ming Hua failed to take the Capital as well. All of a sudden, the vast world had no place left for him to hide.

When confronted with Lin Bing's great army of vengeance, his first instinct was to run. Together with his men, he fled all the way back to his own controlled territory in the province of Galok, where he swiftly ordered the garrison units to join him in his rebellion.

Imperial Calendar, Year 779, April 2nd, twenty-five divisions formerly under Lei Hong's command had raised their banners against House ZiChuan.

High Command wasn't too bothered by the recent developments. Compared to the recently ended rebellion from Yang Ming Hua, House Liu Feng's massive attack on the capital six years ago, or half century earlier, the Border Army's rebellion, this was but a small scale local rebellion near the border. It wouldn't threaten the longevity of the House in anyway. Therefore, there was no need for panic. They could simply leave everything in the capable hands of the two Deputy Commanders, Lin Bing and Luo Bo. Given their vastly superior army in comparison to the rebel's, perhaps it would take a while, but the outcome was certain.

To all except Di Lin.

No one in the entire Capital had foreseen the terrible consequences this small rebellion could lead to, except him. On the very same day, Do Lin strongly advised High Command to divert three hundred thousand men from the Central Army or the Border Army and redeploy them to the Far East. The overwhelming force was necessary to crush the rebellion within the week, preventing the situation from escalating any further.

Supreme Commander – Luo Ming Hai didn't even bother to read his proposal. He simply said he needed to go to the bathroom and excused himself in front of the others. Fifteen minutes later, He came out without the document. Apparently he had "used" the proposal while he was in the toilet.

The only resort left to Di Lin was to see Headmaster – ZiChuan Shen Xing directly, but he was quickly being told by the Headmaster: "The jurisdiction of the Ministry of Supervision lies in overseeing the general conduct of the Officers of House ZiChuan, whether any of them had engaged in criminal conduct, fraudulent behaviour or dereliction of duty. The affairs of the Far East fall under the administrative purview of the High Command. You have exceeded your

authority; therefore it is best if you withdraw.”

While Di Lin was being sent into a wild goose chase between the Ministry, High Command and the Headmaster’s House, something else happened in the Far East that had escaped everyone’s notice. It was something so insignificant, not even the “Capital News” saw fit to write an article about it.

Imperial Calendar, Year 779, April 11th, the days before the war between House ZiChuan and the rebels was about the break out in the Far East. In the province of Charo, a village so small, it wasn’t even marked on the map of the Far Eastern Region, where majority of its population were Beastmen, with some minority of Serpents. A group of less than hundred warriors from all races came together and formed the “United Freedom Army” with the sole purpose of defending their lands from their common oppressors. In other words, they had openly declared their independence, separating themselves from House ZiChuan’s rule.

Twenty years later, (Part-time) Deputy Inspector General, (Full-time) Historian, Tang Chuan published his greatest work – An article on the analysis of what caused the Great Rebellion of the Far East in the year 779.

The article analyzed the economical, political, cultural, historical, geographical, and many other aspects surrounding and leading up to the event. It debated whether the outcome was inevitable or by happenstance, and included a few additional notes from the author himself.

However, his publication was mostly a scheme to get a favourable endorsement for his promotion and perhaps a raise. The real victims were the editors in charge of reviewing his script. The total number of editors who could finish reading its List of Contents in one breath and hadn’t fainted straight after from shortage of oxygen... were zero.

In the article, Tang Chuan believed that the Great Rebellion in year 779 only seemed random, but in fact many of the historical, economical, political, cultural and geographical factors leading up to the event, had suggested otherwise.”

“During the reign of the Empire of Light, the Far Eastern Regions were mostly barren wastelands. As the border region connecting the great Demon Empire,

most of its local population were a lawless and hardy folk. Even the Demons despised them and called the place the 'Land of Barbarians'. Although the Demons mostly ignored its existence, every time they invaded the Humans living in the core regions of the empire, the great Demon Army would pass through the Far Eastern Regions. Naturally, they wouldn't mind stripping the place bare along the way. Hence its local population, (mostly Beastmen, Dragonkin, Serpents, Goblins, Dwarfs and even a small number of Demons.) held very little liking for the Demon Empire."

"When House ZiChuan was first founded, it was surrounded by enemies. Its founder, ZiChuan Yun knew the only way to secure its position was to expand its territory as much as possible, and thus, the reason for the constant war for territory against foreign powers. However, in the path of its westward expansion, it was confronted by the powerful House Liu Feng. The war between the two Houses lasted for several decades, and the death toll numbered in the hundreds of thousands. In the end, House ZiChuan had not won an inch of land."

"During ZiChuan Yun's final years, he came to the realization that he should have focused his attention elsewhere. Despite almost all of his generals' and advisors' protest, he turned his spear around and ordered for the advance into the Far Eastern Region, which had always been seen to be within Demon Empire's sphere of influence. In the eyes of many, it was suicide. He should pray to the Gods to be left alone by the demons; it was simply unthinkable to actively provoke a monster of that size! ZiChuan Yun's plans however, turned out to be a great military success."

"Under the banner of 'Liberate the Far East from Demon's tyranny, Unite and rise against the Demon King, Save the Far East and protect its people.' three hundred thousand of House ZiChuan's mightiest army arrived in the Far East.

House ZiChuan's actions quickly rallied the local tribes to their cause, gaining them large amounts of active support in the form of volunteers. The local tribes even formed volunteer armies to fight alongside House ZiChuan against the Demon Empire's aggression!"

"Fortune smiled, the Demon Empire was caught in the middle of a war of succession that year, and had no attention or army to spare to deal with the situation in the 'Land of Barbarians'. They merely sent a few recon forces as a



show of strength, which gave House ZiChuan the necessary time to establish its hold in the Far East. After another two centuries of active efforts from the several generations of Headmasters, even more territories were gained. As of now, the Far Eastern Region encompassed over one fourth of House ZiChuan's total territories."

"Most of the native population of the Far Eastern Regions were from the non human races. (Beastmen, Serpent, Dwarf, Goblin and Dragonkin etc) It made up of over eighty percent of the total population in the Far East. Humans made up for the remaining less than twenty percent. Yet, the less than twenty percent Human population were considered as the 'Nobles' in the Far Eastern Societies. Most of the other races served the Humans as house servants, slaves or workers. They also did the most tiring work, like farming, building or lifting..."

"No one really knew when it all began, but the great Army of Saviours of House ZiChuan had turned into the Army of Oppressors. Naturally, many of the local tribes had raised their complaints in the past, but when the well equipped, well disciplined and well trained Army of House ZiChuan 'very patiently' taught them a few lessons in blood and fire, they quickly admitted their 'wrongdoings' and returned to the 'loving arms' of their 'caring father'."

"Politics wise, death of the Far Eastern Army Commander – Ge Ying Xing had no doubt lit the fuse. Not only because Ge Ying Xing commanded everything in the Far East, but after his death, there wasn't any other commander in the region that held enough prestige in the army. It was like a snake without its head. And most importantly, Ge Ying Xing's death had led to House ZiChuan's civil war, which in turn led to the redeployment of the local garrison units. Some joined the rebels and some went to fight the rebels. As a result, many of the local defence forces were left vulnerable."

"When the troublesome races like Beastmen or Demons woke up in the morning and noticed just how vulnerable those who had ruled over their heads for as long as they could remember truly were... They naturally came to the conclusion that it was a much better idea to simply tear their Human masters to pieces with their iron claws than to serve them like slaves under the searing sun and overseer's whips."

"Of course, an important reason as to why the rebellion spread so rapidly was

no doubt related to the lack of interest and incompetence shown by the members of House ZiChuan's ruling echelon..."

.....

In the Far Eastern province of Charo, the rebellion of a small nameless village became a rebellion of seven villages in mere three days. On the fourth day the rebellion had grown to include hundreds of villages, and on the sixth day it had spread even further to include thousands of surrounding villages and towns.

In response, the provincial governor, Red Banner Master – Lin Wei urgently dispatched the garrison force against the insurgency, but the three thousand human garrison force was vastly outnumbered and outmatched by the united rebel army ten times their size. The outcome was a humiliating defeat...

Within a week, almost the entire Charo province had fallen under rebel's control as the rebel army laid siege against the provincial Capital, the city of Locke. The flame of rebellion showed no signs of slowing down and continued to spread to the several surrounding provinces... Urgent requests for reinforcement kept coming like a snowstorm...

.....

In the coming week, the flame of rebellion had spread like a wild fire. Even the Capital realized the seriousness of the situation. An urgent meeting was called at the request of ZiChuan Shen Xing to discuss the deployment of countermeasures. Inspector General – Di Lin was not a member of the High Command, but given his prior 'involvement', the fact he had been to the Far East and knew the situation better than anyone else, ZiChuan Shen Xing invited Di Lin to the meeting despite Luo Ming Hai's protest.

However, the moment the meeting began, they were already left flabbergasted by what Di Lin had proposed...

"Inspector General – Di Lin, can you repeat what you just said?" ZiChuan Shen Xing couldn't believe what he had heard.

"Yes. The situation in Charo has spun out of control. We must treat them with extreme prejudice by making an example of them. I suggest we massacre the entire rebel population and openly desecrate their remains. It will strike fear into

them and make anyone think twice before rising up against us.”

The commanders attending the High Command’s meeting looked at each other and laughed: “There we go again! Di Lin the Butcher. It is almost as if he knows nothing else but to kill everyone.”

Luo Ming Hai gave me a sneer, hinting all sorts of mockery, then he smiled: “Di Lin seems to want to kill the rebels the same way he killed the civilians in the Capital. Then again, I suppose killing civilians has always been his forte!”

Commander Fang Jin interrupted: “To round up all the rebel population, how many men would we need?”

Di Lin ignored Luo Ming Hai’s provocation as he answered: “I estimate we’ll need around two hundred to three hundred thousand men!”

“Where do you suggest we can obtain such large force?” Ming Hui Asked: “Are you suggesting we draw them from the Central Army or the Black Banner Army again? I’ve make it clear, you can’t have a single soldier from the Border Army. Liu Feng Shuang has been stirring troubles around the western border, raiding our outposts. No one knows what that bitch is up to.”

“She wants to keep the Border Army pinned down, stopping from sending reinforcement to the Far East!” Di Lin answered casually, but screamed in his head: “How do you not understand that?! What a tool!”

Di Lin spoke politely to ZiChuan Shen Xing: “Diverting forces from the Border Army or the Central Army would have been a good idea if it was a week ago. Now it is too late! Deploying troops from here to Charo all the way in the Far East is going to take at least three weeks, and we must crush the rebels right now!”

“If not from here, then from where?”

Di Lin responded calmly: “Province Galock!”

A moment of silence, everyone was shocked by what those words entailed.

“You want us to order the army that is about to attack the traitor-Lei Hong to retreat and fight the barbarians instead? You are aware they are dug in and are ready for battle, and you want to tell them to turn their back now and let Lei Hong kick them in the ass?”

Di Lin lowered his voice: “There is another alternative... we can negotiate with Lei Hong, and accept all his demands. As long as he is willing to fight the barbarians, we can promise to pardon all his crimes! His foremost concern right now is to stay alive, I’m certain he’ll accept.”

Almost everyone was outraged by what Di Lin had suggested. Fang Jin even rose to his feet, shouting: “How could you even suggest us to pardon the bastard who killed Sir Ge Ying Xing?”

Di Lin continued patiently: “It’s only a promise. It doesn’t mean we have to follow through.”

“That won’t work.” ZiChuan Shen Xing sighed: “If we promise to pardon the killer of Ge Ying Xing, we are going to have a riot on our hand before the day is over, and tomorrow morning the Council of Elders is going to have all of our heads. Too bad, really, it’s an excellent idea.”

He turned towards Stirling, who had been there the whole time but hadn’t said anything: “Commander Stirling, what are your opinions on this matter?”

Stirling seemed unfocussed, but ZiChuan Shen Xing’s inquiry made him put his thoughts on the matter at hand: “I also believe that we should divert troops from Galock, but not all of it... I believe a few divisions should be enough to quell the rebellion. Those rebels are in the end, a coalition of barbarians. They shouldn’t offer too much resistance. They are also disorganized and undisciplined... I believe we can defeat them with ease.”

Most of the commanders supported Stirling’s suggestion.

ZiChuan Shen Xing announced: “Very well. Today’s war council is hereby concluded. I hope the High Command and the Ministry can have a fruitful working relationship in the future. Let’s not keep wasting our time on complaining about others. It will only serve to brew hostility amongst ourselves...”

Everyone quickly left the room, leaving only Di Lin standing where he sat. Stirling called for him a couple times, but he kept a straight face and ignored him. In the end, Stirling had no choice but to leave him behind.

“Small Rebellion?” Di Lin murmured. Slowly, facing the empty Conference Hall,

his mouth twitched into a wild laughter: “Hahaha, Small Rebellion they say! It is going to be a thunderstorm that will lift House ZiChuan by its root! You will all be dead soon, fools!”

“Sir Xiu, I heard you haven’t been reading the news lately, is that true?” Chang Chuan asked.

“Who told you that? I always keep myself updated with all the important state affairs. I made sure to read the latest issue of Playboy and Penthouse every day... But, why are you asking?”

“Oh, nothing, I just heard the technology stocks had plummeted, the currency devaluation rate is through the roof, even higher than Luo Ming Hai’s blood pressure, all the while the bank interest rate is at an all time low. The only thing retaining its value is the real estate! I’m wondering if you are interested, Sir?”

“Oh, I see... You have a point. So what do you recommend?”

“Well, Sir. You are in luck. I’m the perfect person to ask! Check this out; I just happen to be in possession of a lovely mansion, two hundred and eight square meters, a three story building. It is located in the heart of Locke, the provincial capital of Charo. Convenient transportation, beautiful neighbourhood, great prospects, it’s guaranteed to rise in value! Here, I have the brochure and the deed to the house.”

“Hmm, looks good. What will it cost? I don’t have that much money...”

“Sir. You are practically family to me. What do you take me for? Don’t worry about the money! But since you mentioned it, how about a pretty sum of twenty thousand as a token of my appreciation?”

ZiChuan Xiu laughed to himself; a house like this usually went for at least two million... Still, he pretended to be embarrassed: “Hmm, Chang Chuan... You know I’m like the poorest Officer out there. I barely have any savings. I don’t think I can come up with that kind of money... How about fifteen thousand?”

Chang Chuan hesitated, but finally relented, albeit unwillingly: “You are lucky that I’m in need of the money. Sigh... All right Sir. Let’s make the trade! Here is the deed, and...”

Chang Chuan's eagerness gave ZiChuan Xiu a moment of pause. He made sure to double check the deed..."

Chang Chuan seemed insulted: "Sir, are you questioning my integrity and character? Here, look. The deed is issued by the City Hall of Locke. See? It even has the official seal on it... If you don't trust me, then I will sell them to Luo Jie instead..."

"Hold on, wait. Fine, here is the money." ZiChuan Xiu took out a stack of stinky bills from his shoe hidden underneath his bed, and counted them to Chang Chuan."

"Ok then, the deal is made. Fair and square!" Both of them spoke the words at the same time and they both smiled the moment they turned their back to each other. The way they smiled, was pure evil.

Five minutes later, Luo Jie and Bai Chuan came to his room.

"Sir, I heard from Chang Chuan that you are interested in real estate. My family has a house in the City of Sha Jia in the Far East and I'm planning to sell it..."

"Sir, I got a house too I want to liquidate..."

ZiChuan Xiu double checked every page of their Property Documentation. They all seemed genuine. He wondered: "Why are you all selling your properties? Chang Chuan was the same..."

"Well, Sir, Chang Chuan got into some trouble with the law enforcement, and needed money to pay the fine."

"Then, Luo Jie is...?"

"Luo Jie accumulated a huge gambling debt; he is being hunted by the loan sharks."

"What reason do you have then, Bai Chuan?"

Bai Chuan robbed her eyes, pulled out her handkerchief and wiped her tears: "My mother's aunt's cousin's fiancé's brother's neighbour was diagnosed of cancer, and is in need of a lot of money... I'm not rich, the pay being in the Army Reserve isn't great either. My only choice is to sell my family's estate."

She burst out in tears.

ZiChuan Xiu felt really bad for her. It was his fault that she ended up in the Army Reserve; he even scammed her of all her hard earned savings by lying to her that he would use them to “pull some strings”...

The tiny bits of conscience still left in him screamed in agony – something like that had never happened before!

So he only talked them down to selling their properties to him for half price; he even paid them cash!

.....

ZiChuan Ning came in to his room: “Brother, what are you laughing at while staring at a pile of paper?”

“Oh, Ning. Do you still remember when I told you I would buy you a pretty giant doll?”

“Of course. That was seven years ago! But you never came through! And all the perfume, dresses, make-ups you promised me... I even borrowed you a shit tons of money! Also, you haven’t paid a cent for the rent or the food, and...”

“Ning, haven’t I taught you? You are the next Headmaster of the House. You must learn to be generous! We are family. Don’t be so stingy eh? Anyways, forget all that. I will check out the flea-market tomorrow, and buy you a big giant doll! Once I re-sell all the properties...”

ZiChuan Ning took a closer look at the deeds.

“Ning, I suddenly realized I have a keen eye for business! Should I consider retirement and become a trader? It is not like I’m getting anywhere with this Deputy Commander job. Hey! Where are you going? I’m talking to you! This is important!”

ZiChuan Ning returned to the room with a stack of newspapers. She laid them open next to each other; each topic seemed to outshine the next:

--Rebellion of the Far East is spreading like a wildfire, City of Locke is in grave danger!--

--Alert! The rebels sacked the City of Locke! Provincial Governor, Red Banner

Master Lin Wei died honourably in battle! Five thousand ZiChuan soldiers were killed!--

--The rebels razed the City of Locke to the ground! The rebels massacred the entire Human population!--

--Latest update! City of Sha Jia is surrounded by the rebels!--

--Urgent news! Large amount of rebels appeared all over the Far Eastern Region! Many cities have fallen!--

--Far Eastern Army – Red Banner Master – Li Ke has been appointed as the Commander for the anti-rebel army!--

--The five divisions of the anti-rebel army has met the rebels, victory will be ours!--

--The rebels are getting wiped out! – Li Ke has given the following statement in his interview.--

--Requiem of Blood! The story of anti-rebel army's demise!--

--Loyalty beyond life! Sir Li Ke will live on in our hearts...--

--Special update: total humiliation! The defending garrison unit stationed in the Province of Yun has mutinied!--

--The province of Charo has fallen into the enemy's hands. No human has survived the onslaught except one – Interview with the young banner warrior, Hu Hai who recently escaped death!--

--Kiss of the reaper – the adventure of Hu Hai!--

--Update: Garrison unit of province Minske has mutinied! The provincial capital has fallen!--

--Conservative estimate, the current number of the rebel army has reached three hundred thousand – Military Expert talks of the upheaval in the Far East!--

--High Command has given the order, in order to avoid mass panic, Capital News shall no longer report war news from the Far East!--

--From now on all our topics will be about “boy loves girl” or other innocent topics. Contributors are welcome!--



ZiChuan Xiu's face instantly paled, from mere white to chalk, and from chalk to black...

"Brother, what is the matter? This is my uncle's problem. Let him clean up his own mess!"

"..."

"Brother, you look... scary!"

"..."

"I never knew you cared so much about state affairs. I'm glad you have found a higher calling... Brother, where are you going in such a hurry? Did you eat something bad? The toilet doesn't work!"

.....

"Luo Jie, Chang Chuan, Bai Chuan! Get your ass in here now! How dare you trick me! I will feast on your tears tonight!"

"Where did you all go?"

"Those with the suitcases, guards, stop them!"

"Huh, Sir, you are mistaken... I'm not Luo Jie. I'm Luo Jie's twin brother, Luo Kuang!"

"That is right, you seem familiar Sir. Have we met before? Let me introduce myself, I'm Bai Chuan's sister, Bai Pi!"

"Huh, naturally I'm not Chang Chuan either! I'm Chang Chuan's younger brother's older brother! Is something wrong, Sir? Wait, stop. We are all gentlemen; we can talk about this! Help..."

"Ouch... not in my virgin ass!"

"Heeeelp!"

.....

Thirty thousand soldiers perished under the command of Red Banner Master Li Ke, a devastating loss the High Command did not anticipate. It proofed that the rebels were not as disorganized as they had thought. Instead, they were a well

disciplined force of armed warriors. It also served to further illustrate the incredible talent of their military leaders. They first exploited Li Ke's arrogance, luring his army deeper into their territory, and then surrounded him with superior force. For such skillful display of combat strategy to come out from a race which was commonly believed to be pure brutes with little brains, one couldn't help but reconsider – if the Beastmen possessed same kind of cunning and guile of Humans, in addition to their natural physical prowess, how long could Humans remain the masters of these less evolved races?

One very important factor that led to House ZiChuan Army's defeat was: During the heat of battle, one division of Beastmen and one division of Serpents from House ZiChuan's army had mutinied at the same time, causing the front line to crumble in an instant. It was exactly what Di Lin had feared. A large portion of the Far Eastern Army consisted of local non-human races. In the war of Humans against other races, their loyalty was not something you could count on. The situation continued to evolve as Di Lin predicted, the terrible defeat was like adding firewood to what was already a wildfire. Everywhere, non-human soldiers sent to suppress the local revolt turned on the human officers leading the army, causing entire division to mutiny and then joining the rebellion.

Within the month, what was once the rebellion of a small village had spread to seven provinces. The number of people participated in the rebellion had reached five hundred thousand. The speed and the ferocity, in which the rebellion had spread, gave everyone a pause.

Someone did recall what Inspector General – Di Lin had predicted, but could only lament regretfully: "If only I knew..."

The second war council joint by High Command and the Ministry was assembled at the request of ZiChuan Shen Xing to discuss how to best handle the current situation.

As of now, the other commanders had all realized their mistakes and the correctness of Di Lin's foresight. They were fully prepared for Di Lin's disgusting gloating and humiliating mockery... They had turned themselves into solid rocks.

But Di Lin didn't say a word this time around. He just kept smiling, but doing so silently... making everyone completely miserable in the High Command.

In the end, ZiChuan Shen Xing finally lost his patience as he kept asking Di Lin: “Inspector General, what is your opinion on this matter? Would you like to share?”

And every time, Di Lin would answer directly: “Sir. I have no opinion on this matter. I would rather hear what other Commanders had to say.” It was a worse torture than straight out killing them. Luo Ming Hai’s cheeks were swollen red.

As a result, the war council did not reach any conclusion, and had to end prematurely.

Later, Stirling came to see Di Lin: “Brother, I knew you had something to say. Why wouldn’t you say it?”

Di Lin smiled bitterly: “Because it is pointless. When Lei Hong first mutinied, I told them we have to redeploy the Central Army to the Far East. Nobody listened. When the non human races rebelled, I told them we needed to divert the army fighting Lei Hong to deal with the rebellion; we could even negotiate with Lei Hong for a temporary truce. And again, nobody listened, instead they went to draw forces from the provinces west of Fort Warren. I’m sure they are going to order Far Eastern Army to ignore Lei Hong and focus their full attention on the rebellion of races next... But too bad, they are always one step behind.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

“My proposal would scare Luo Ming Hai shitless and give him a stroke.”

Stirling smiled: “My blood pressure is just fine, you can tell me!”

Di Lin looked at Stirling: “All right, then listen up. In my opinion...”

Di Lin spoke one word at the time: “We don’t need to care about Lei Hong or the rebellion. Pull the Far Eastern Army all the way back to Fort Warren, together with every garrison unit stationed around the border, including the ones guarding the border to the Demon Empire. We must relinquish our control to the entire Far East... Perhaps then we can still salvage this.”

Even Stirling was shocked, so much so he couldn’t even speak. Di Lin sighed: “See, even you can’t handle it. What is the point of me telling them?”

.....

High Command's reaction was exactly as Di Lin predicted. They just gave the order to Deputy Commander Lin Bing and Luo Bo currently holding in the province of Galock with the bulk of Far Eastern Army, ordering them to cease the battle with Lei Hong and turn around to deal with the revolt!"

The order arrived just when the Far Eastern Army was caught in a fierce battle against the Rebel Army. Given the chaos of the battlefield, if they gave the order for retreat now, they might as well bend over and let their enemies kick them in the ass!"

When Deputy Commander Lin Bing first received the order from the High command, she shouted angrily: "Luo Ming Hai knows nothing of war! If we turn around now, we may as well let them kill us! Fuck him and his stupidity!"

The more level-headed Luo Bo put a hand against her mouth and began preparing for the retreat.

Luckily, under Luo Bo's shrewd leadership, a normally very flawed tactical manoeuvre, to retreat right in front of your enemy, was made to look like a perilous ambush, deterring Lei Hong from giving chase. After suffering a few casualties here and there, the Far Eastern Army of three hundred thousand strong successfully retreated from the province of Galock and began their march towards the rebellion of races.

The battle against the rebellion of races went pretty much according to plan at first. The Far Eastern Army booked success almost every day; even Luo Ming Hai was relieved. But when the army reached the heart of the rebellion, the province of Yun in Year 779, June, they suddenly lost all contact. Three hundred thousand men seemed to have disappeared from thin air, leaving everyone in the High Command in the dark..."

Only Inspector General – Di Lin seemed not to be bothered by it: "Lei Hong is not a fool after all."

New reports only began to arrive on July 5th, the bulk of the Far Eastern Army shrunk from three hundred thousand down to fifty thousand. They had to give up their heavy weaponry and run back to Fort Warren with tails between their legs. Behind them, the combined Army of all races pounced at them like hungry wolves. There were fifteen divisions of Lei Hong's Rebel Army amongst them as

well.

Only until now did they realize what had happened: The traitor Lei Hong had contacted the Army of all races, promising them to cut off Far Eastern Army's supply line and their path of retreat. In the eyes of the Army of all races, it was no doubt a win-win situation.

They quickly came to an agreement in the province of Minske, and signed what would later be known as the infamous "Minske mutual protection pact". Its content entailed how they would divide the Far Eastern territories after House ZiChuan's defeat. According to the treaty, everything east of Fort Warren, the Far Eastern Regions would fall into the hands of the non-human races, allow each race to rule over themselves, and everything west of Fort Warren, the former core regions of House ZiChuan would belong to Lei Hong.

Many people found it strange, how Lei Hong, who was a Deputy Commander of House ZiChuan himself, could be so arrogant to think that with the support of a few Beastmen or Serpents, he could topple House ZiChuan's rule. Surely he should have known just how powerful House ZiChuan really was.

But there were others who thought the only reason Lei Hong signed the treaty, was to ensure his own survival. He was definitely not delusional enough to think that he could somehow bring an end to House ZiChuan's hold over the continent which had lasted for nearly two hundred years. By agreeing to that particular proposal, he could make it look fairer to the other parties in the treaty, so they wouldn't question his sincerity. It wasn't every day a human would come to their aid.

The fact was Lei Hong knew exactly how the outcome would affect his chance of survival; it was in his personal interest to fulfil his part of the bargain. He went on to cut off Far Eastern Army's supply line, the path of retreat and any chance of contacting the High Command. And that was what led to the mysterious disappearance of the Far Eastern Army.

Both Luo Bo and Lin Bing felt relieved when the Far Eastern Army finally managed to catch up to the bulk of the Army of all races on the beach of Red Lake in the province of Yun. They immediately gave the order to engage.

Even though the soldiers were hungry and exhausted by the time they arrived,

they knew if they win this battle, the rebellion would effectively end and they would be able to go home. The thoughts filled them with strength and made them fight with renewed vigour.

For a while, the Far Eastern Army had the complete control of the entire battlefield. Their armoured lancers crushed through the lines of the Army of races, sending them scattering in all directions. Everyone thought their victory was certain!

Until the sun began to drop, and glimmers of sabre and lancers flashed over the horizon. A thundering roar later, the same armoured lancers, except under a different banner and wore a different colour showed up behind them. It was Lei Hong's Rebel Army!

The already exhausted Army of House ZiChuan had no chance of stopping the charge of Lei Hong's still fresh army. By then the scattered Army of races had regrouped and fought their way back... They scattered quickly, but they regrouped swiftly as well.

Luo Bo took reign immediately, killing a dozen of deserters with his sabre; Lin Bing stood in the forefront of the danger, encouraging the soldiers to continue to fight. But their defeat was decided, nothing else they did mattered.

Battle of the Red Lake, Far Eastern Army sustained two hundred and thirty five thousand casualties, including three Red Banner Masters, fifteen Banner Masters and forty six Deputy Banner Masters. Army commander, Luo Bo was serious injured... Since the founding of Far Eastern Army, not even when they faced the elite forces of the Demon Empire, had they ever suffered a loss this great...

Rebellion rolled on like a snowball, bigger and more fiercely every passing day. Soon the flame of chaos had engulfed twenty one of the twenty three provinces in the Far East.

Over a million rebel army battered against Fort Warren, time and time again! Pressing request for reinforcement poured down on High Command like storm, every word sounding more urgent than the previous!

--Rebel army has besieged Fort Warren, their army is massive!--

--Request for reinforcement, the defence won't last.--

--We have ran out of medical supplies; we can no longer effectively treat the wounded!--

--We have run out of arrows and rocks. We pushed them back today with spits, tomorrow it will be blood!--

--Even the trainees from the Far Eastern Army Academy have joined the fight! We are now sending children into battle!--

--Staff Officer Luo Bo is heavily wounded, Deputy Commander Lin Bing has taken charge.--

The final letter was signed by Lin Bing and Luo Bo together in blood:

--If the reinforcement does not arrive within the week, then all that is left are our corpses.--

Fort Warren is the sturdiest barrier separating the Far East from the Capital City – Di Du. If Fort Warren falls, the million strong Rebel Army will pour through the gap like a flood sweeping away countless human lives living in the core areas of House ZiChuan. It is a scenario House ZiChuan simply cannot allow to happen at any cost!

Year 779, July 30th, The High Command gave the order, Acting Central Army Commander – Stirling was to lead fifteen hundred thousand, newly reformed Central Army to reinforce Fort Warren. Commander Fang Jing shall follow closely behind with the Black Banner Army. (Since Black Banner Army was stationed further away.) In addition, House ZiChuan had declared emergency state level two. All officers from the Army Reserve had been recalled to active duty, effect immediately.

.....

On the dusk of a summer night, the sun began to set in the west, ZiChuan Xiu lay comfortably in the hammock net against the tall tree in front of the house. There, he drank the cold wine and watched the fiery clouds over the horizon, thoroughly enjoying the occasional times of peace and quiet. He was in a pleasant mood. As he raised his head, dust stirred abruptly across the distance,

and from there, sound of hooves was rapidly approaching. Through the dust, he could make out the shape of a rider, a lightly equipped horseman soaked in sweats. He had his left hand on the reins, and his right waved a small red banner. A moment later, a red feathered arrow landed accurately on the gatepost in front of ZiChuan Ning's house, and the rider shouted: "Alert!"

The rider flashed past him in an instant, and had no intention of slowing down, leaving only a trail of hoof prints behind drenched in yellow stains of horse sweats. ZiChuan Xiu rose up slowly as he watched the shadow of the rider slowly disappearing. He had a stern look on his face.

The sudden noise alerted ZiChuan Ning. By the time she came out, the shadow of the rider was mostly gone. She shared her concerns with ZiChuan Xiu: "Brother, what happened?"

She looked down and saw the red feathered arrow stuck in the gatepost, her face turned pale: "You have been summoned?"

ZiChuan Xiu nodded silently, pretending to not have seen the pain and worry revealed in ZiChuan Ning's eyes.

.....

Stirling came to see him later in the night. ZiChuan Xiu calmly welcomed him.

"I'm heading to the Far East tomorrow." Stirling went straight to the point.

ZiChuan Xiu frowned: "That bad?"

"Worse than you think. Fort Warren is about to fall and we haven't even recalled all our reserves..."

"I'm talking about your terrible sense of fashion. You even wore your socks backwards!"

"....."

"Never mind, don't take your socks off here. I'm sure they smell terrible. So why have you come to see me tonight..." ZiChuan Xiu knew all too well why he came.

"I want to see Ka Dan."



ZiChuan Xiu fell silent.

“Xiu!”

“Stirling, think about it for a second. You are about to lead hundreds of thousands men to the Far East to battle Demons. And yet, you came here to see the princess of Demons the night before! Is that something a Central Army Commander should do? Aren’t you afraid of your men finding out? Aren’t you afraid of someone report you to the High Command, calling you a traitor?”

“Besides, what are you going to say to her when you see her? Something like ‘Hi, Ka Dan, how are you. I’m going to kill your uncles and aunts tomorrow. Give me some encouragement in the form of love, and let’s kiss?!’”

“And what do you want Ka Dan to say to you? ‘My beloved Stirling, kill them quick, kill them fast, kill them nicely and kill them all. I’ll marry you when you come back?’”

“Or perhaps you intend to make her cry while holding on to your thigh: ‘Don’t, please don’t go.’ So you would relent, unable to fight the Demons fully by the time you get to the Far East and let them slaughter you like a pig!”

Stirling seemed to be in pain. For that to appear on his granite-like and determined face was particularly impressive. ZiChuan Xiu quickly acquiesced: “Fine, you can have fifteen minutes!”

.....

In the middle of the spacious Guest Hall, Stirling sat face to face with Ka Dan in an upright posture.

ZiChuan Xiu, ZiChuan Ning and a few others stared at them, eyes unmoving.

Their gazes quickly shifted to him, then to her, all the while eating sunflower-seeds. Someone whispered: “Look, he blushed!”

“I saw. Ka Dan blushed as well.”

“Shh, be quiet. Let them talk!”

Stirling looked at them helplessly: “Xiu, didn’t you promise me fifteen minutes?”

“I did, I’m giving you fifteen minutes to see Ka Dan. Isn’t she right in front of you?”

“Yes, I can see her. But somehow, I feel the room is a bit too small for all these people!”

“I think it is fine. Other than you and Ka Dan, it is just the few of us. I’m sure the room is big enough for all of us. Stop wasting time, a minute has already past!”

“But the question is, why are you guys even here?”

“Well. Bai Chuan is bored. Chang Chuan wants to master the art of seduction. Luo Jie probably never saw a real girl in his life, and my sister... Right, Ning, why are you here?”

“Erm. I ran out of romance novels. So I thought I’d come and see if there is any romance going on tonight... Ouch, Stirling. Let go of my ear! It hurts! Fine, I’m leaving!”

After ZiChuan Ning left the room, Stirling turned to Luo Jie, asking concernedly: “Master Luo, I heard you are having trouble with your stomach lately. You should rest.”

Luo Jie: “Nothing of the sort. I never get sick, and my stomach is fine..... Ouch, that seriously hurts! Fine, I’m going. Mercy please!”

Stirling retracted his fist as he escorted Luo Jie out of the room with his gaze, smiling: “Have a nice night! So, Banner Master Bai...”

“Sir, you don’t have to ask. I suddenly remembered something important. I have to go! Can I be excused, Sir?”

“Well, Master Bai, please feel free to leave if you wish. What about you, Master Chang, do you wish to sign up as the vanguard on the battlefield of the Far East in the near future?”

“You misunderstood, Sir. I’m having a terrible headache. Please excuse me Sir!”

After everyone left, ZiChuan Xiu showed his annoyance: “I hate those idiots who keep getting in the way. So annoying! Anyways, Stirling. There’s only us left

now. So feel free to let it all out!”

“Bang” and the door were slammed shut behind him. Apparently ZiChuan Xiu was kicked out of the Guest Hall by “one of us”.

A moment silence later, Stirling cleared his throat with a small cough.

“Ka Dan... I mean, no. Perhaps I should call you Your Highness. How have you been?”

“.....”

“I’m leaving for the Far East tomorrow. I’m going to war, but not against your kind. It is against the rebels of our own.”

“.....”

“It could be very dangerous. I may never come back.”

“.....”

“Which is why... I mean... I wanted to see you tonight. And so, in other words, it is like, I wanted to say that, you know... It’s been so long. Perhaps you already know what I want to say...”

“.....”

“I... you... very much... Ka Dan. Ever since I first saw you, I have always been..... you.”

“.....”

“I’m not born as a noble. I’m just a lowly peasant... But I think, my salary is enough for two people to live a.....”

“.....”

“I know, you are a princess, you are royalty. You will never lay you eyes on someone like me, a penniless soldier who has nothing of value but his broken sword. I just wanted to see you one last time tonight before I leave. I just want to talk to you, that is all.”

“.....”

“Your return to the Demon Empire will have to wait. The Far East is mess right

now. It is not safe. But don't worry, I will find a way to help you get back."

"....."

"You still haven't said anything. Are you just tired? Or Have I been wasting your time?"

"....."

"Very well. It is getting late. Good night... I hope we can still be friends. Haha, you don't have to worry about me. Haha. I'm not sad at all. Haha, ha."

"....."

"All right. I'm going. Please take care. If there is anything you need, just let Xiu know. I told him to take good care of you, don't worry."

Just when Stirling had stood up and was about to leave together with his sadness, a soft and gentle voice reached him from behind: "Dear Stirling, the arrows have no eyes. Please be careful."

He couldn't believe his ears. Turning around enthusiastically, he spoke: "Ka Dan, you..."

Ka Dan already walked away, leaving a few words barely audible to the ear: "I'm not really in a hurry to go back."

In the empty Guest Hall, Stirling came down to his knees, raising his arms in a prayer: "God, please bless me with fortune! Do I really deserve such?!"

Except neither the ecstatic Stirling nor the shy Ka Dan had noticed, that not sure when it happened, but the normally a fine set of window, had a couple of 'peepholes' ..."

ZiChuan Xiu: "Hey! Chang Chuan, are you done? It is my turn!"

Chang Chuan: "Damn! I though some mastermind like Stirling would be better at this. But no, he was absolutely terrible. He has brought shame upon the name of player!"

Luo Jie: "Yo, Bai Chuan. You are a girl too. What do you think Ka Dan's words meant? Is that a yes or no?"

ZiChuan Xiu: "Hurry! Hurry! Take her by the shoulders and push her down! Use

your intense look and your powerful arms! Conquer her, enthrall her! Firmly hold on to her arms, and unbutton her dress...”

Chang Chuan: “Sir, you lost! I told you the love is in the air tonight. Now pay up!”

ZiChuan Ning: “Brother, should you really be peeping on Stirling and Sister Ka Dan doing that kind of things?! It seems wrong!”

ZiChuan Xiu: “Shut up! I saw the way you were staring earlier! You didn’t even blink! I don’t need a lesson of ethics from you!”

Imperial Calendar, Year 779, August 1st, the rebellion continued to spread like a wildfire in the Far East, and House ZiChuan has suffered hundreds of thousands casualties. Close to thirty million Far Eastern citizens struggled in the midst of the chaos. House ZiChuan’s sturdiest barrier, Fort Warren was about to fall and a million barbarian rebels were about to descent upon the defenceless core regions of House ZiChuan. From the Headmaster, High Command down to every single soldier and citizen, none could escape the countless sleepless nights it brought.

Yet, one of the three heroes of House ZiChuan, Central Army Commander – Stirling, had just spent the happiest moment of his life.....

Imperial Calendar, Year 779, August 2nd, the City of Di Du was already wide awake. Today was the day Central Army Commander – Di Lin and hundred fifteen thousand of his companions were supposed to leave for Fort Warren. Headmaster ZiChuan Shen Xing was there to bid them farewell in person.

Since most of the Central Army were sons of Di Du, thousands upon thousands Capital’s citizens had come to admire the mighty army, hoping to catch a glimpse of their families. Mothers holding their sons’ hands, newlywed wives in their husbands’ arms, tears all over their faces, and cries everywhere.

Today, Commander Stirling was the focal point of everyone’s attention. Headmaster and members of High Command accompanied the army for dozens of miles, in the end Stirling had to come down to his knees, only then did Headmaster reluctantly bid his farewell: “Stirling, this is as far as I go. Know this: everyone will be waiting for the news of your victory here at home!”

The words moved Stirling to tears. He made a promise while still on his knees: “Do not worry, Sir. I will wipe out the Rebels and restore the peace! If I don’t succeed, I’d rather die in battle than to return empty handed!”

“Shh” ZiChuan Shen Xing whispered to Stirling: “Hey now, none of that talk! Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. I only need your safe return. I don’t have a son. I have always treated you like one my own...” It was a heartfelt speech.

“Li Qing is here as well; don’t you have something to say to her?”

Stirling had spotted Li Qing’s feature amongst those who came to bid their farewells earlier, but he only nodded, hinting at her, while turning his gaze back to the Headmaster: “Sir, I carry the fate of the House on my shoulder. This is neither the place nor time to let personal feelings getting in the way. Would you tell Li Qing I said goodbye? Thank you Sir.”

“Sigh, even though a man should put his country above his home, you are being..... too harsh!”

Despite Li Qing’s worried look and ZiChuan Shen Xing’s lament, neither of them took notice of Commander Stirling being slightly absent-minded today. He kept diverting his gaze towards the crowd, searching, only to retract it moment later, disappointed...

“Hey, Sister Ka Dan. You came all this way, why don’t you talk to Stirling?” ZiChuan Ning asked Ka Dan.

Underneath a dark veil, Ka Dan stared at Stirling’s shadow left behind by the surrounding crowd, shaking her head lightly: “If I walk up to him as who I am, I will only cause him troubles...”

A drop of hot liquid fell on the back of ZiChuan Ning’s hand. Her eyes widened, and through the veil she saw Ka Dan’s elegant face: “You are crying...”

.....

Standing beside them, ZiChuan Xiu sighed under his breath and lamented: “Since the days of old, in the shadows of a country’s success, you can always find a woman’s tear. Even for the likes of Stirling and Ka Dan, a unique couple, the law still applies...”

ZiChuan Xiu contemplated, lamented, all the while...

“Brother, you hand... why are you touching the girl standing in front of you like that... and at that place too?”

“Oh, she seems so sad. I just want to comfort her a little...”

“Smack!” A loud slap later, the girl standing in front of him turned around, and she was outraged: “Pervert! How dare you grope me in public! My husband is heading to the Far East with Sir Stirling, to put his life at risk for his home. And you stand here as a coward, bullying a lonely girl like me! Do you have no shame?!”

Her words had angered the crowd, and a several fists surrounded them...

“Hahaha. Let me explain, it is clearly a huge misunderstanding!”

“I have always been a fervent supporter of those with the noble cause... Haha... How could I have done what she had suggested?”

“Listen, it was an accident!” ZiChuan Xiu acted all seriously, declaring his intent in a righteous tone: “Due to time, space, air flow, gravity and many other unknown factors, the position my hand just happen to unconsciously overlap with the position of the bulging part of her backside. It was a design of fate, and no one’s fault really...”

“Ouch, hey, there is no need to get violent! Ning, Ka Dan, where did you go? Help me explain to them!”

“Oh, we are just passing through. We don’t know that pervert. Do you worst!”

“Ungrateful little...! Ouch, not down there! That really hurts! Help!”

.....

August 6th, the battle of Fort Warren had reached a critical point. The tall walls finally gave under the relentless attacks from the Rebel Army, collapsing to a gap. Hundreds of thousands Rebel Army poured through the crack shouting incomprehensible warcries.

At the time, the City of Warren was already fully mobilized. They had no forces left to send to plug the gap. Watching the endless Rebel Army storming towards the fort, Deputy Commander Luo Bo and Lin Bing could only burst into a bitter

laughter. By then, they had given their all, exhausted all their resources. They were ready to die for their country at any given time...

Lin Bing deplored with her sword raised up high: "My only regret, is to not have seen the traitor Lei Hong bleed out in front of me... I have been robbed of my justice!"

Luo Bo caught her hand: "Wait!"

"Don't you see what is happening? What are you waiting for? Surely you are not planning to confess to me right now!"

"Fuck off. I'm not in the mood for your jokes! There is something strange going on with the rebels!"

Indeed, horns sounded with certain urgency in the midst of the rebel army, and it wasn't anything like the horns of victory. Their banners waved aimlessly, messengers dashed through the lines and officers shouted loudly, something was definitely amiss. Their soldiers reluctantly halted their steps, hastily trying to regroup. Something had caught them off guard; they were in disarray.....

Horns of war sounded from the northwest!

The two Deputy Commanders, who were prepared to take their own lives moment earlier, shared a surprised look and uttered in unison: "Could it be reinforcements?! Surely not that fast?" Overjoyed in anticipation, they locked their hands tightly together!

"An army has appeared in the northwest!"

"It is a human army! Sir, the reinforcement has arrived! The reinforcement has arrived!"

"Only Cavalry! Numbers unknown!"

"Sir, I saw the banner! It is the Central Army! The Central Army has arrived!"

"Stirling... It is Stirling's forces!"

"Long live the king! Long live the Headmaster! Long live the Central Army! Long live Sir Stirling!"

As if their words were heard on the other end of the horizon, deafening



warcries erupted from the riders: “Woaah!”

It was no doubt Central Army’s warcry! Both Luo Bo and Lin Bing were pleasantly surprised: “How did he get here so fast?!”

.....

When the army left the City of Di du, Stirling regrouped all the highly mobile cavalry units together, forming ten Cavalry divisions and twenty Infantry divisions. He believed the time was of the essence. Despite the protest from his fellow officers, he gave the order to have Deputy Commander Qin Lu take charge of the infantry divisions while he raced day and night, nonstop towards Fort Warren with the Cavalry divisions. He even created a new forced march record – Four days to get from Di Du to Fort Warren.

After arriving at the battlefield, and seeing the Rebel Army in disarray trying desperately to regroup, Stirling quickly gave the order: “Charge!”

His advisors all argued in protest: “Sir, the enemy outnumber us greatly, and we are exhausted from the march. We should enter Fort Warren and get rested first, before we attempt any offensive manoeuvres.”

Stirling refuted: “We just arrived, and our morale is high! The Rebels have been bashing their heads against the walls of Fort Warren for days. They have lost their edge. The only reason they are in disarray right now is because they don’t know how many men we have. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity!”

The Rebel Army tried desperately to regroup. Due to the abruptness however, they only managed to form six square formations of Beastmen<sup>[1]</sup> infantries in the way of Stirling. If they could stall his forces for a short while, their great army would be able to regroup, form up, and with their superior forces, they would crush Stirling with ease!

Several thousand stout Beastmen swung their giant arms, shouting wildly.

Central Army roared: “Woaah!” Hooves thundered forward, a neat line of pitch black pressed in on the Beastmen with lightning speed.

Thousands of arrows surged forward, dropping the front lines of the Beastmen like flies, leaving them screaming for pain.

The arrows took both the Rebel Army and the Defenders on top of the walls by surprise: “Why is Stirling’s army all horse archers? And why are they shooting while charging? How can archers charge into enemy ranks?”

When the charging riders approached the Rebel Army within hundred meters, Stirling’s clear voice echoed across the battlefield: “Front row, bring forth the Lances!”

“Clack”, the rapidly approaching Central Army Cavalry quickly sheathed their bows and switched out the lances. Their agile, stream-lined movement was no doubt what made them the most well-trained Army of House ZiChuan. To be able to execute such technical manoeuvre so perfectly while charging on horseback, even the Rebel Army was in awe.

The horses charged forward at the same pace while the riders lowered their body, extending a row of lances one and half meter forward from their mounts. Meanwhile, more Central Army Cavalries loosed their arrows from the backline, raining more death upon the Rebel Army.

The gap between the two armies quickly narrowed, fifty meters, thirty meters, ten...

There were warcries and there were shouts.

The two armies clashed head-on!

With added momentum, rider’s lances pierced through Beastmen’s hardened hide with minimal resistance. Some even pierced through several Beastmen in quick succession. The second row of Beastmen fought back with sticks and shovels, toppling the riders from their horseback, but was subsequently cut in half by another incoming rider who had switched to the sabres more suited for close quarter combat...

In an instant, several hundred Human soldiers had hit the ground, separating them forever from their pining loved ones far away at home. At the same time, several thousands of Beastmen were felled by the lances and sabres...

More and more riders fearlessly jumped into the fray, before long, Stirling’s entire force had entered melee with the enemy!

Stirling’s forces held the clear number advantage, and were far better armed

than their rebel counterpart wielding sticks and shovels.

Faced against Beastmen's natural physical prowess, Human soldiers usually fought in formation. With three soldiers a group against each Beastmen, organized combat against unorganized defence. The Rebels were in the end not a professional army. When it comes to unit cooperation and bravery, they were no match for the well trained and organized regular Army in close quarter combat, leaving everyone to fend for themselves. In less than ten minutes, six and half Beastmen divisions were sent fleeing in all directions.

Stirling's whistle sounded loud and clear. Like a dream, the scattered riders immediately regrouped into massive square formations.

"Ignore the ones running away. Our goal is the bulk of the Rebel Army!"

Empowered by their first victory, soldiers shouted together: "Woaah!" and pounced like hungry wolves, tearing into the disordered bulk of the enemy forces in the middle of withdrawing from besieging the Fort.

Seeing the deadly riders annihilating all the hardened Beastmen in mere minutes, many of the Serpents, Dragonkin and Dwarfs already started to flee.

They were no soldiers after all. Sure, they might seem eager when they were winning, but the moment the tide turned against them, their first instinct was to run. The ones left behind had to quickly make a decision: Should they follow their officer's order and form lines or follow suit and run... Before they could make up their minds, the riders had descended upon them. Screams, panic everywhere. Whatever hesitation they may have had, was gone in an instant!

Serpents: Gurogumi! (Run!)

Beastmen: Walawa Ke! Waja! (You damn cowards! Fuck it, run!)

Dwarfs: Ekorok! Thamar ekorok! (Surrender! We surrender!)

Dragonkin didn't even say anything and already fled.

The only regulars amongst the Rebel Army were Lei Hong's human divisions, but they left three days ago to deal with the two remaining provinces in the Far East who did not join the rebellion – Province Deja and Province Iribart. He would never have guessed that several hundred thousand Rebels could be sent

into a panic spree by mere fifty thousand Cavalries...

Imperial Calendar, August 11th, a breathless messenger brought the news that would send the entire City of Di Du into a state of euphoria: “Victory at warren! Inflicting seventy-one thousand casualties! Capturing eleven hundred and six thousand enemy combatants! The rebels are on the run and Sir Stirling has given chase! Fort Warren still stands!

Under Headmaster – ZiChuan Shen Xing’s order, the City was to enter five minutes of silent prayer for those who had fallen.

High Command made the announcement later, to officially appoint Stirling as the Central Army Commander. (Removing the Acting part)

After the short prayer, the time had come for the million citizens to celebrate over night... Stirling’s name was constantly being mentioned, and each time it was followed by a wave of cheers: “Long live Stirling!”

The local taverns soon found themselves exploded with celebratory remarks: “May Stirling live forever! Cheers all around!” and the Sales of beers, flowers, fireworks, talismans in Di Du quickly went through the roof, greatly boosting the effective demands of the respective products, and consequently, causing the very stagnant economy since last year to enter a period of accelerated growth.

Many streetwise book publishers began rushing their new titles on the same night:

--Chronicles of a famous General – Stirling--

--The untold story between me and Stirling – Banner Master Li Qing’s deepest secret--

--Stirling in real life--

The reporters on the other hand, took full advantage of the fact that newspaper came out much faster than books. Full pages of articles of Stirling appeared on the front page of their papers the very next day:

--Stirling in the eyes of his friends--

--The great man next door – An interview of Stirling’s neighbour--

--My dinner with Stirling--

--I knew he would be great one day – Stirling’s kindergarten teacher claims she knew he would be great one day when he first saw him pee--

--Stirling’s first confession! – Stirling’s classmate, Lady Liu Mei Li’s statement: I never loved him!--

There was another announcement made on Imperial Calendar, Year 779, August 11th, except this one slipped under everyone’s notice. The “Capital Times” did write a small article on the subject in the "lost and found" section: “Due to the increasing tension in the Far East, High Command has appointed Reserve Division Deputy Commander – ZiChuan Xiu to conscript all class of men from the province of Mozof, Kesan and Anxing for the newly formed Emergency Response Unit.

Imperial Calendar, Year 779, August 13th, under the searing sun of summer, the ones bearing the fate of 'saving House ZiChuan from imminent destruction' had left the City of Di Du. Their goal was the province of Mozof, Kesan and Anxing located in the heart of House ZiChuan.

“Sir, we are dying from the heat! Why do we have to march when the sun is at its hottest, are you trying to get us killed?”

“Sir, does Supreme Commander – Luo Ming Hai have a grudge against you? Why is he sending you to do the recruiting? It’s bare none the most excruciating task available. We did nothing to deserve this!”

“Save your breath. That idiot wasn’t listening at all! See, he is giggling like a little girl again staring at the ‘Capital Times’!”

"Sir, what is so funny?”

“Oh, Bai Chuan. Here, have a look. They wrote an article about me in the news, and it is on the front page as well! It’s been so long since I last made it to the front page!”

“Let me see.”

“According to one of Stirling’s childhood friend – Stirling has always been a high achiever ever since he was young, and was often praised as a dedicated student. His childhood dream was to one day, be able to serve House ZiChuan

and that honorable goal had guided him over the years, made him the man he is today. It gave him the courage to overcome any obstacles in his way and finally, become one of the greatest Generals of our time! Stirling's story taught us that, as long as you put your mind to it, you can accomplish just about anything! Once you have a clear goal in sight, and it will show you the way! Stirling is the role model of countless youngsters..."

"Sir, I don't see your name anywhere?"

"Oh, that 'Childhood Friend' is me. But I didn't say any of those words, what I told the reporter was..."

"Stirling was a bloody rascal when he was young. He skipped class everyday to play Cards with Di Lin, and whenever he loses, he would always run away instead of paying what he owed, no integrity whatsoever! Also, he cheats on his tests every time by peeking Di Lin's answers, but Di Lin wasn't any better at it either! So they would both fail their tests every year. The teachers often scolded them: 'How do you two always have the exact same wrong answers?'"

"Somehow my words got twisted when the reporter wrote them down!"

.....

The group arrived at Province of Kesan two days later. The local Reserve Division Chief – Deputy Banner Master Jing Chang gave them a warm welcome.

Jing Chang was a little over thirty years old, average looking and well-spoken. The first impression Luo Jie, Bai Chuan and the rest had of the man was that of someone surprisingly familiar yet incredibly annoying. Somehow his smile reminded them of a certain someone way too much!

"So, the enlistment of militia, how has it been going so far? Master Jing?"

"Oh, rest assured, Sir! I always made sure to fulfil my quota when it comes to National Security. We trained every week and adopted all the military disciplines required of us! Everyone's morale is high and they are confident. Just give them the word, and they would march fearlessly towards battle, and bring hell to House ZiChuan's enemies..."

ZiChuan Xiu interrupted his monologue: "I see. But my question is how many have enlisted so far?"

“Ever since I heard of the Far East Rebellion, how the lowly savages desecrated our House’s sacred ground, my heart has been fuelled with anger and passion. My only regret is not having a pair of wings to fly me directly to the distant Far East, where I can bring death upon the Rebel Army myself! It’s very unfortunate that I’m but an insignificant officer working in the Reserve Division, and without direct order, I’m not allowed to abandon my post. I could only funnel my rage and passion into preparing the new recruits for what is to come. Through my actions, I shall proof my undying loyalty to House ZiChuan...”

“Good, very good. I fully understand your honorable intentions. So how many new recruits do we have?”

“Thanks to every Reserve Division staff’s tireless efforts, great progress has been made to the mobilization of the Army Reserve, and we were able to book great results! Naturally, we are not without faults and mistakes were sometimes made. But we should not let our occasional slip up define us. I assure you in the greater scheme of things, they are but needles in the haystack. Our achievements and contributions are what are important here; our shortcomings and failure are merely...”

“How many recruits?!”

Jing Chang hesitated, and then whispered softly to ZiChuan Xiu’s ears.

ZiChuan Xiu leapt to his feet: “That is all?”

“Ahem, surely someone as wise as you should understand the difficulties we have to face, Sir. Due to the severe lack of funding, we can’t ensure the welfare of our staff, no yearly bonus to speak of, and even the public funds for recreational activities were limited to thirty times a week per person... Life is hard! Yet, despite our challenging work environment, the majority of the Reserve Division staff still managed to carry on with their tasks and overcome all obstacles. They are worthy of praise for achieving as much as they did, Sir.”

“But this is way too few...”

“I have heard many stories of your great military achievements, Sir. Surely someone as wise as you understands the importance of quality over quantity! Yes the number of our recruit may fell short in term of numbers... but we are definitely ahead in term of quality! A hundred well-trained soldiers can easily

best a thousand unorganized rebels! The average age of our new recruits is merely thirty-one years old! We have both battle-hardened veteran warriors, and brave young lads! The perfect combination in term of combat effectiveness! They are definitely the elite of the elites!”

“Very well, then you wouldn’t mind to conduct a military drill I presume.”

Just when Jing Chang was about to relay the order, ZiChuan Xiu stopped him: “Out of curiosity, are you really a Deputy Banner Master?”

“Well. I was initially part of the Army Reserve. I was reinstated to active duty after the event in Far East. Sir, what about you...?”

“Well. I was part of the Army Reserve as well...”

Both of them shared a smile, and they both understood: “So you are also a son of a bitch just like me!”

Bai Chuan whispered to Luo Jie: “Doesn’t that Deputy Banner Master reminds of you someone?”

.....

The few guests from Di Du were dumbfounded when they saw the “Elite of the Elites” gathered in the training square.

Bai Chuan stuttered: “Why are there so many elderly holding crutches, with barely any teeth standing in the line? And that one, he couldn’t even walk straight without someone holding him up... Shit, he just fell on his face after taking two steps!”

Jing Chang explained: “Oh, Old man Wang is just having another heart attack. Let him rest a bit and he will be fine! As you see, Sir. These are all battle-hardened, extremely experienced veterans of war! Some of them even participated in the fourth generation Headmaster’s great crusade! They are the glorious, revered and priceless treasures of House ZiChuan!”

Luo Jie was shocked too: “And that kid over there, he is at most fifteen years old, and there is one even younger... Hey, brat, get away from me. My pant is not for you to wipe your snot with!”

Jing Chang elaborated: “And that is the young warrior of our future! He may



seem a bit weak for now, but I'm sure after a few battles, he will become a great fighter! The young ones all have incredible potential! It is nothing to be scoffed at!"

Chang Chuan frowned: "I doubt they can survive even one battle. Master Jing, is that how you come up with the average age of thirty one? Is there even one young men of age twenty to thirty amongst them?"

Jing Chang acted as if he was wronged: "Master Chang Chuan, why would you say something like that? Don't you see that man over there? He is exactly thirty years old!"

Everyone's gaze quickly shifted towards the direction his finger was pointing – A man with only one arm sitting on a chair with his wooden leg pointed sideways..."

ZiChuan Xiu turned back towards Jing Chang: "You must have misunderstood. We did not come here to open a nursing home, kindergarten or to provide shelters for wounded."

.....

Everyone returned to the camp, and sighed.

"What do we do, Sir? High Command's deadline is in September. We are out of time!"

"Sir, I have a suggestion. Should we just stuff the order at that stupid Jing Chang, tell him to get it done within the week?"

"Those damn useless bureaucrats! We can't rely on them to get anything done. We have to find a way ourselves."

"Sir, what are you writing?"

ZiChuan Xiu said: "Bai Chuan, come here for a second. Did you bring that mini-skirt of yours?"

.....

Day two, the billboards of Bai Chuan wearing a super sexy mini-skirt had shown up everywhere in the streets of a certain Provincial Capital.

--Once in a lifetime opportunity for any well-endowed man!--

--Tour registration is now open! All young men are welcome!--

--Three day's tour in the Capital! The glory of the historical sites and the mystery of ancient ruins awaits! Everything you need to fill your senses with wonder!--

--Lovely schoolgirl, Miss Bai Chuan will tell you everything you want to hear, promising a night you will never forget!--

--Travel costs are all included! Totally free!--

--Hard to believe? But it is all true!--

--Are you interested? Then take action! You do not want to miss out on this golden opportunity!--

--Make sure to bring your papers and contact us--

--Address: Phoenix Hotel, Room 123--

--Contact Person: ZiChuan Xiu, Luo Jie and Chang Chuan--

Within three days, every single useless bums, thieves, bandits, robbers, con-artists, and perverts within three hundred miles radius of a certain Provincial Capital had lined up in front of the Phoenix Hotel. Many of them even got into a fight trying to secure themselves a better position in the line.

The things they all had in common were: Young, energetic, healthy and like to get in to trouble. The good news however, was that the public security of that certain province had seen great improvement after Xiu's Company's recruitment effort. Especially the crime rate of robbery, thievery and public violence had dropped to an all time low.

As for them, Deputy Commander ZiChuan Xiu accepted anyone willing to sign up. In less than three days, he had accomplished everything High Command ordered him to do, and would soon return to Di Du with what would later be known as, the most powerful 'Army' of House ZiChuan!

According to Historical Records, on that day, Imperial Calendar, Year 779, August 18th, ZiChuan Xiu accomplished the mission to replenish troops for the first time! It was a day to be remembered, it was the day that marked the

incredible future waiting for them!”

After returning to Di Du, Bai Chuan brought a white banner from High Command and reported joyously: “Sir, High Command has given us the permission to name our new Army!”

“Nice! How about we call this unit the Luo Jie’s deathguards?”

“Fuck off! I’d rather call them ‘Luo Jie’s death’ guard. Naturally, we should name them Chang Chuan’s handsome unit!”

“What a disgusting name! Bai Chuan, which one do you prefer?”

“Neither! I think we should call them the Pink Army of Bai Chuan!”

“That is just terrible... Sir, what do you say...”

“Hey, Sir. What are you doing?”

None of them had noticed, that ZiChuan Xiu already wrote down a big character of ‘Xiu’ right in the center of the white banner!

“That is it. From now on, our army will be known as, ‘Xiu’s Company’! I have a feeling, that this army will one day... Hey, stop peeing on it! Desecrating the army banner is punishable by death!”

.....

The first banner of Xiu’s Company was still preserved in House ZiChuan’s Family Museum to this day.

Its historical value and importance were truly priceless.

# **Purple River - Chapter 6**

## Tiger of ZiChuan

After the battle concluded at Fort Warren, Central Army Commander Stirling didn't wait to regroup with Central Army Deputy Commander Qin Lu's Infantry Divisions. Instead, he only delayed slightly for the wounded to settle in before he led the thirty thousand Central Army Cavalries in pursuit of the Rebel Army fleeing towards the heart of Province of Yun. The quickness of his advances could very well be considered as reckless. Even the Capital was worried: "Could it be another Battle of Red Lake?!" The memories of the Battle were still fresh on everyone's mind, how three hundred thousand of House ZiChuan's finest were defeated at the Beach of Red Lake in the Province of Yun. They almost lost the entire army!

Both the Headmaster and the High Command had sent several urgent messages after Stirling, telling him to exercise caution! In their eyes, going after the heart of the rebel territory with only thirty thousand men was pure suicide! And House ZiChuan could not afford another Battle of Red Lake!

Yet the usually cautious and obedient Stirling acted very uncharacteristically of himself, responding only in short messages: "Opportunities in battle are fleeting. When the General is far away in battle, he does not have to obey all of Emperor's orders.<sup>[1]</sup>" As if he was in such a hurry that he didn't even have the time to explain.

At the time in the entire Capital City, only ZiChuan Xiu and Di Lin understood Stirling's intentions:

First, due to the rapid development of the rebellion situation in the Far East, the Far Eastern Army which bolstered over a million troops seemingly collapsed over night. It was obvious that great deal of local garrison and border defence units still operated within the Rebel controlled provinces, but were unfortunately separated or surrounded by the Rebel forces. If he could get in touch and regroup with them, slowly and surely, he would be able to rebuild a force of respectable size.

Second, there were still two provinces, Deja and Iriya, under House ZiChuan's control. The majority of the population within those two provinces were Humans, and thus they were not easily swayed by the rebellion. Through the

rebel prisoners, Stirling had learned that the traitor Lei Hong was already on his way to Deja, with fifteen divisions under his command. No matter from a strategic or a humanitarian point of view, it was Stirling's duty to rescue the five million citizens residing in those two provinces, who had remained loyal to House ZiChuan despite being heavily surrounded by the Rebel Army.

Third, and the most important reason, the couple hundred thousand Rebel Army after their defeat at Fort Warren, were now like a burnt child who dreads fire. They would likely run at the first sight of trouble. In ZiChuan Xiu's words: "Anyone who doesn't take advantage of the situation is a fucking idiot!"

Stirling knew all too well how difficult it was to come by another opportunity like this again. If he let those hundreds of thousands Rebel Army rest up, regroup and come back at them. The situation in the Far East would likely drag on for months if not years. When both House ZiChuan and the Rebel Army had weakened each other, if House Liu Feng or the Demon Empire then decided to come and crash the party, the Far East would be forever lost to House ZiChuan!

However, given the amount of troops currently available to Stirling, to surround and completely annihilate the enemy was simply out of the question. Besides, if you back an animal into a corner, it's going to bite! Therefore if the huge Rebel Army had no place left to run and decided to fight back, thirty thousand Cavalries would not stand a chance! But then, Stirling remembered six years ago, when ZiChuan Xiu defeated Liu Feng Xi Shan at the Capital...

Every time the Rebels stopped to recuperate or dined, Stirling's pursuing forces would appear behind them, and several thousand lightning fast sabres would find its way between the Rebels and their meals. The Rebel Army might be large, but after a devastating loss, joining another battle was the last thing on their mind. And thus, "whoosh", couple hundred thousand Rebels quickly scattered to the winds.

Stirling's Calvary didn't try to stop them either, only focussing their attention on dealing with those who chose to stay and fight. Not that there were many of those idiots to begin with, but soon there was none left! It was also a great consolation to the Rebels that Stirling only tried to hunt down those who got left behind, because that meant for the Rebels, they didn't need to outrun the riders per se, they just needed to outrun their own!

After the same had repeated many times over, running as soon as they saw Stirling's rider had quickly become a conditioned reflex.

Once it became a habit, many patterns began to appear:

The best time to get attacked was before the breakfast, because then the air would be fresh, they would be fresh. It was the best time for a jog. Besides, jogging in the morning increased your appetite and provided many other health benefits as well...

Getting attacked during dinner was... acceptable. Five thousand human riders shouting warcries chased behind them, as hundreds of thousands rebel army of different races trampled over each other trying to get away, all the while holding their bowls and utensils. Due to all the practise opportunities they were getting, some even learned how to eat and run at the same time...

"What we really can't stand is if Stirling attacks after dinner!" Rebel Army claimed: "It is the single most inhuman act! When you just filled your belly, and had to run for miles on end, can you even imagine how painful that is?!"

And it happened all the time, when a rebel soldier on the run would suddenly fall to his knees, screaming in pain. Since diarrhea and appendicitis were so common amongst the rebels, sometimes they would even catch the pursuing riders unawares and trip them over, and whose fault was that...

It would even be ok if was only during the meals, but frankly, Stirling had given a new meaning to the phrase "make sure they are cared for". Every morning he would come and say "Good morning", every noon he would "pay them a visit", every afternoon he would show up to "say hi", and every night he would tell them "Good night"! Even after midnight he would still express his "concerns" by making sure that everyone could have a good night's sleep. Of course, the way he showed his affection and friendliness might have been a bit crude, with several thousand sabres swinging and all.

As the chase went on, Stirling's attack became more frequent as well, often when a group had just gone by, another had already appeared. As a result, many of the exhausted Rebels would rather be taken as prisoners than to keep running. Many of them did wonder: "Why does Stirling's Army never get tired?"

Stirling divided his thirty thousand Cavalries into six groups, with five thousand

riders in each, and ordered them to attack in turn. Which was why whenever a group attacked, they would have the stamina to carry through. He even gave each group the specific instruction: “Never chase too far, always leave a road for them to escape.” Due to Calvary’s superior mobility, no matter how fast or how far the Rebels ran, Stirling’s forces could always be found within ten kilometres from them.

Chasing superior forces and do so by dividing a smaller force into even smaller groups. A manoeuvre that directly contradicted everything the military strategists believed in.

If the manoeuvre wasn’t executed by a famous General such as Stirling, and even succeeded, the commanding officer in question would likely have been condemned as an idiot by all the military experts and historians alike. But now they could only accept it as a miracle, and then hectically try to find theoretical basis to support Commander Stirling’s tactical genius.

Either way, whatever happened, happened. Some historians would even claim it was inevitable.

But Stirling knew that the chase only appeared to be dangerous, it had in fact very little risk. Under his relentless attacks, even if the rebels wanted to set up traps or ambushes, they wouldn’t have the chance to do so. The Rebel Army of mixed races had to fend off over a dozen attacks a day, harassing them when they ate, and when they slept. Every day, their numbers grew smaller and their morale grew weaker. Other than keep on running, there was very little else they could spare the time or energy for!

This long drawn out pursuit took them across six provinces, over three thousand kilometres and lasted twenty three days. It would later be known as “The Great Race of Far East”.

Close to a “million” Rebels had gathered at the feet of Fort Warren on August 12th. (Based on Far Eastern Army Deputy Commanders, Luo Bo and Lin Bing’s rough estimation, they had at least seven hundred thousands) By September 9th, only less than hundred thousand made it back, with tails between their legs, to where the rebellion first began, the Province of Yun.

And so, Stirling had thoroughly avenged House ZiChuan’s defeat at Red Lake.



He peeled away at the large Rebel Army like an onion, one layer at the time.

In the midst of countless gazes, a shining new star rose over the Far Eastern Region of the continent! Its blinding radiance reached all the way to the Demon God Fortress of the Demon Empire in the east, and the Great Square of House Liu Feng's Capital City in the west. From Di Du's High Command down to every secret hideout of the Rebel Army in the Far East... Everyone, everywhere across the continent, mixed with all kinds of different emotions, spoke repeatedly in every language in every way, the exact same name: "Tiger of ZiChuan – Stirling!"

Imperial Calendar, Year 779, Early September, upon receiving High Command's conscription order, the first group coming from the fifty six provinces of House ZiChuan, two hundred thousand draftees had assembled in the Capital City – Di Du, and would soon be sent for the Far Eastern Front.

The officers and soldiers assembled came from all provinces and districts of the House. Some had strange local dialect, some had terrible facial hairs, and most of them wore all kinds of strange outfits. The poor ones from the City dressed like beggars; the sons of the wealthy dressed suavely in expensive suits, as if they were here to attend a banquet, and the rural aristocrats had their rusty armour on, so ancient that one could easily mistaken them for something stolen from the museum, even their war horses were so old they would be eligible for nursing house if there was such for horses. ZiChuan Xiu saw for the first time ever, an old man dragging a fifty kilo heavy machete behind him, gasping. His nefarious mind worked quickly: "What could he do with that machete I wonder? He couldn't even kill himself with that thing if he tried!"

The new recruits attended the military inspection ceremony holding all kinds of horrible banners, like "Reaper's Guard", "Skeletal Avengers", and the ones from Rockswig even called themselves the "Merciless Volunteers."

Just based on the appearance alone, they were at least millions times more brave than the soldiers fighting on the frontline, and many times more confident as well, waving their sticks whole day drivelling with distain: "Forget those savages in the Far East; they are not worthy to stain our blades! I can club them all to death with my cane alone, eyes closed!"

Supreme Commander Luo Ming Hai had always considered himself to be a man of sophistication and patience. And right now, his most important task was to inspect the new recruits coming from every corner of House ZiChuan's territories. As each not-so-square square formations marched past the Inspection Podium, many empty shoes would always get left behind on the otherwise empty parade ground. (Apparently, soldiers on the back keep stepping on the shoes of those marching in front of them.)

The other officials attending the Inspection Ceremony all had a strange and painful expression on their face, trying desperately not to laugh. Only Supreme Commander – Luo Ming Hai was somehow able to retain his calm as he made his speech to the former owner of those shoes, complimenting them for their diligence and altruism, thanking them for their loyalty and bravery, and finally inspiring them to fight for the House and contribute to the greater good.

The soldiers rejoiced loudly: "Long live House ZiChuan! Long live the Headmaster!" As if all those shoes bathing under the sun while filling the empty parade ground somehow were never theirs.

Luo Ming Hai probably thought himself a saint right now! But on the day of September 10th, when the new recruits from Kesan province walked past the Inspection Podium in casual clothing while smoking cigars, as if they were here on vacation. The "Saint" finally lost it! Even their banner had the paint job done by a five-year-old. He had to look very hard through the magnifying glass to make out what looked like the character of "Xiu" written in the center of the banner...

"Who is that angry old man up there? He looks awfully familiar!"

"Are you stupid! Don't you read the papers? That is Supreme Commander – Luo Ming Hai, a man of importance!"

"Really? How come no one told me there was a signing session planned for the Xiu's Company tour? I would have brought my little brother if I did! Yo, Sir Supreme Commander. How are you doing?"

"Everyone look, the Supreme Commander is smiling! And his nose wiggles up and down when he smiles, how cool is that?"

"Look, he is trying to speak! The way his mouth opened and closed, reminded me of a hooked fish!"

“Hey dude, where are you going?”

“It is my first time in the Capital; I’m going to ask for an autograph!”

Restraining his anger, Luo Ming Hai asked ZiChuan Xiu as calmly as humanly possible: “Sir Xiu, would you mind telling me what you see down there?” The way he gestured at the new recruits, was like pointing at a pile of dog shit left on the side of the road.

Rising slowly to his feet, ZiChuan Xiu gave Supreme Commander an extremely generalized and accurate description: “Men, Sir!” then quickly left through the backdoor.

The judicious Luo Ming Hai barely managed to keep himself in check, glaring sideways at Inspector General – Di Lin here to attend the Inspection sitting beside him. Then turning his gaze skywards as if he wasn’t speaking to Inspector General – Di Lin directly: “How does Inspector General feel concerning Deputy Commander ZiChuan Xiu’s dereliction of duty in regards to the recent recruitment efforts?”

Di Lin smiled as he took a sip of his tea, then speaking softly: “He has character; I like it.” And left the parade ground, completely ignoring the furious Luo Ming Hai who was about to explode any second.

ZiChuan Xiu ran back home like a terrified rabbit, inhaling deeply: “That was close! Luo Ming Hai almost caught me!”

ZiChuan Ning handed him a cup of warm tea: “I heard our Supreme Commander, Sir Luo Ming Hai’s high blood pressure acted up again during the Inspection Ceremony... Surely it has nothing to do with you, right? Brother?”

“Well, the weather is too hot and he has high blood pressure. He really shouldn’t work so hard and should take better care of himself!” ZiChuan Xiu spoke with a very sad look on his face, while secretly praying to every deity regardless whether he believed in them or not: Hear my prayer, O thy mighty Gods, may Supreme Commander fall ill to terminal disease, and never to awake again!

Bai Chuan hurriedly rushed into the room: “Sir, it is bad! Our soldiers mutinied again!”

“Again? Don’t they get tired of this shit? Monday they complained about the food, Wednesday they complained about the lack of strip shows. Today is the third! We gave them all the food they can eat, and free lap dances every night, why do they still want to mutiny?”

“Well, Sir. They are complaining about the dancer’s proportions. You know... not sexy enough! Those fuckers, they even asked me to... dance for them! We should punish them severely!”

Bai Chuan was furious, but embarrassed at the same time: “Though I’d have to agree, those fuckers have great taste...”

“Nice try! Unbelievable, they have barely been soldiers for three days, now even damn cows are good enough to pass as angels!” Ignoring the hateful look on Bai Chuan’s face, ZiChuan Xiu continued: “But as their commanding officer, it’s my duty to look after them, or no one would risk their lives for me in battle! So, Bai Chuan, can’t you perhaps make a small sacrifice? You know, it is all for the greater good, to bring peace to the Far East and rescue our people from turmoil...”

“Sir, next time when you try to sound all wise and sincere, can you please not drool while doing it? You don’t sound convincing at all!”

“Oh, I was just moved by the thought of finally doing the right thing for once. Anyways, I will try my best to satisfy the need of our brave warriors who are about to risk their lives in battle for the future of House ZiChuan! What else do they want?

“They say they want Lady Ning to give them a lap dance as well...”

“.....”

“Sir, are you all right?”

“Inform my brother, Di Lin. Tell him to send the Constables... better yet, tell him to kill them all!”

.....

In the second week after the battle at Fort Warren, following Stirling’s arrival, Commander Ming Hui had led the powerful Black Banner Army all the way from

the western border, through the Fort Warren and into Far East.

Commander Fang Jing was supposed to be leading the Black Banner Army, but due to his sudden illness, Border Army Commander Ming Hui led the army instead.

Ever since his arrival at the Far East, the High Command was confronted with two extreme opposite problems: One was the reckless advancement of Stirling's Central Army in the north; the other was the sluggish display of Ming Hui's Black Banner Army in the south.

Two weeks had passed since then, the hundred twenty thousand Black Banner Army were still crawling through Felmick, the province directly east of Fort Warren. He would spend days trying to chase after small group of rebels, taking one step forward and two steps back. ZiChuan Xiu described Ming Hui's speed as: "A healthy snail could outrun him any day in the week!"

Supreme Commander – Luo Ming Hai probably wanted to whip his ass personally if he could, but Sir Ming Hui had all the excuses in the world: "If the reckless advancement leads to another Battle of Red Lake, who will bear the responsibility?"

The fact was, no one could. And thus Ming Hui felt even more justified in his actions. Back when he fought the terrifying Liu Feng Shuang, he was so overly cautious and quick to run away, he never once "lost a battle" against her. This time he turned his extreme caution even up a notch: Every hill could have a Rebel hideout, every forest could be an ambush, and every road could lead to a trap. Even a rock on the side of the road could have several rebels hiding behind them.

Then again, he wasn't completely idle either. Once he encountered a dozen stray rebels defeated at Fort Warren, he exaggerated as having found the bulk of the enemy force of two hundred thousand strong! The other day a guard was bitten by a snake, and the day after, Ming Hui sent the report, informing High Command of a huge Serpent invasion! Of course, many of his men were wounded by the attack, so he had to slow down even more to recuperate."

Even the High Command didn't know what to do with Ming Hui's battle reports anymore. In his reports, Ming Hui claimed to have killed a million Serpents the first day, two million Beastmen the second and three million the third..." The

juxtaposition of their reports made Stirling's major victory at Fort Warren suddenly seem insignificant. Even adding the entire population of the Far Eastern regions together and multiply it by two, it would still be fewer than the total casualties Ming Hui claimed to have inflicted over the last two weeks. And yet, he still couldn't advance because another "five million" rebels suddenly came out of nowhere, blocking his path.

Stirling's battle reports on the other hand were a lot more believable... and more bitter as well...

To the utmost honourable Supreme Commander, Sir Luo Ming Hai:

On September 15th, the Central Army has arrived at the Beach of Red Lake in province of Yun.

-Acting Central Army Commander, Stirling.

The Beach of Red Lake in Province of Yun was neither a place of strategic importance nor a military stronghold, and yet, Acting Commander Stirling (he didn't know he was officially promoted) saw fit to make an exception by taking some time off to write a report to High Command despite his busy schedules. It clearly showed how important it was historically, for House ZiChuan to regain control of this area.

Imperial Calendar, Year 779, summer, who would have thought a place so insignificant, it wasn't even marked on the maps, would cause so many nightmarish memories for House ZiChuan. A month ago, here on a narrow plain separated by river and hills, three hundred thousand Far Eastern Army's elites engaged five hundred thousand Rebels and hundred fifty thousand of traitor Lei Hong's army in an unprecedented battle of massive scale.

Royal Historian – Tang Chuan once gave the following assessment of the Battle of Red Lake: "Here, House ZiChuan lost over two hundred and thirty thousand loyal and battle-hardened soldiers. Their two hundred years of control over the Far Eastern Region, seven generations of honours and dreams, the foundation that would eventually allow them to unite the continent of Western River... everything was mercilessly trampled under the iron hooves of Lei Hong's Army the moment he appeared on the Beach of Red Lake. The defeat of Red Lake had

greatly weakened House ZiChuan's military strength, leading to a series of disastrous events that would soon follow. The Battle of Red Lake was essentially the turning point that changed House ZiChuan from strong to weak."

Stirling was in shock of the carnage displayed in front of him.

At the foot of the hill, a vast plain covered in bodies and broken armors, extending as far as the eyes can see. The pride of House ZiChuan, the armoured lancers lay completely exposed in the open. He didn't know whether it was due to hatred or relish, the victor of the Battle of Red Lake did not find the kindness within them to bury the fallen. Even across several miles of distance, the powerful, thick stench of the rotten corpses in the air was already unbearable.

The sea of broken lances continued until the end of the horizon, where a crooked banner still stood across the distance. The torn-up fabric, swayed by the nightly gale, could still read the words "Far Eastern Army – XX Cavalry Division". Even though the banner still stood, the Banner Bearer had long turned to bones.

Everywhere, huge groups of vultures ravaged the dead, shrieking loudly in a way as if to celebrate their good fortune. Suddenly, anger flared up uncontrollably inside of Stirling as he unleashed a flurry of arrows towards the sea of shrieking vultures, dropping several in quick succession, only then did he let go.

The high ranking officers standing behind him, all watched with concern at the usually calm and composed young Commander, not knowing the reason for his sudden outburst.

"We halt here. Bury our comrades. They died honourably for House ZiChuan; we'll not leave them exposed in the open like this."

A wave of irritation washed over the officers. The Banner Master in charge of the third Cavalry Division, Ma Yuan stepped forward: "Sir. That will waste us a lot of time. We won't catch up to the Rebels like this."

Stirling replied coldly: "And we will if we don't?"

Ten days ago, Stirling's twenty thousand Central Army Cavalries pursued the Rebels into the province of Yun.

After passing through the provincial borders, the rebels took the mountains

like duck to water. It was their home after all. They knew the surrounding hills and forest like the back of their hands.

In contrast, the steep mountain and the rugged mountain paths of province of Yun made the lives of the pursuing human Cavalries incredibly difficult. Coupled with their unfamiliarity of the local terrain, the riders often found themselves riding through the morning mist, circling through the confusing mountain paths, after a long day on horseback only to end up back in front of their camp fires from the day before.

Their only source of direction was based on a book called “Far Eastern Tour Guide” from twenty years ago. A place marked with roads ended up being a river, a place with bridges appear to have nothing more than a few broken piers, and a place said to be the perfect camping site with a great view, turn out to be a pond of quicksand. If they weren’t quick on their feet that night, twenty thousand Cavalries would have been buried in the ground by now.

Much to Stirling’s dismay, the erroneous tour guide was in fact a pirated copy!

Stirling had naturally considered hiring a local as guide, but no matter how much money he offered, the villagers would always stare at him like an idiot. (or thought him was an idiot.) Either way, it was the kind of look that made his skin crawl.

Eventually, an old Beastman did “volunteer” to be his guide. The venture however, quickly led to an entire squad of riders buried under a sinkhole, not a single one had survived. So Stirling had no choice but to give up on the idea of relying on the locals for help. As a result, he had to watch helplessly as the Rebel forces got further and further away from him as they slowly disappeared from the horizon...

Another important reason causing Central Army’s slow progress was the extreme hostility from the local population.

Even though the Rebellion in the Far East first began in the province of Charo, it was in province of Yun where the Rebellion had gained traction. When the news of the Rebellion reached the province of Yun, the entirety of the local population responded as if they came from a single voice. Wielding their rusty weapons, they rose up against the local garrison forces and surrounded the



provincial capital, massacring hundreds of thousands human soldiers and civilians trapped inside.

When the provincial governor, Red Banner Master – Yang Li surrendered after the rebels broke through the gate, the rebels tortured him for three days before finally showing him the mercy of death. It was probably accurate to say that there was no one left but the rebels and their relatives at that point.

Even though Stirling was mentally prepared in advance, he never could have guessed how “intense” the citizens of Yun would welcome their arrival... Within twelve hours, the scouting party was attacked over a hundred times. Ambushes, traps from different groups of rebels, their size varied from a small regiment of over a thousand men to the suicide squad of one or two.

Hidden arrows and spears flew constantly through bushes and trees while they inched forward through the enemy territory. Whenever the army made camp, the locals would sound horns and drums around the camp, causing confusion. The guards were never able to find the source of the disturbance, and sometimes, they never found the way back at all.

When Stirling saw the prisoners they had captured, he was shocked. Almost every one of them was elderly men, woman or children. There was not a single young man amongst them. Where did their young men go? The answer was obvious.

Only then did Stirling realize; how the crafty Luo Bo and the brave Lin Bing, together with all those battle-hardened soldiers from the Far Eastern Army could have been defeated so badly on the Beach of Red Lake.

When an entire race had made up their mind to fight you to the death, the destruction they were capable of was something beyond imagining.

Stirling did ask himself once: “What was the reason that after two hundred years of benevolence House ZiChuan has bestowed upon this land, every single soul living in it still wants to fight us until their last breath? What have we done wrong?”

But his unwavering loyalty and excellent self-restraint quickly stopped himself from seeking the answer.

Stirling always had a notion that: “A soldier should not get involved in politics. When an Army has a mind of its own, it would be the death of a country.”

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Ma Yuan kept his mouth shut, for he had known Stirling was in a foul mood today. He quickly exchanged a look with the other officers, reminding themselves that it would be unwise to get involved right now. Just that nobody could figure out what Stirling was thinking: If we are not giving chase, are we supposed to retreat?

It wasn't the first time the officers had suggested such, their lonesome army of cavalries had extended too deep into the enemy lines. They have left the Infantry Divisions and Logistic Corps far behind, several thousand kilometres from their current position. In the thousand kilometre radius, other than Rebels, there were only more rebels, endless rebels and all kinds of rebels. The barbaric Beastmen, the cunning Serpents, the sneaky dwarves, the vicious demons and the wild dragonkins...

The only thing keeping the army moving forward was Stirling's unwavering determination. As the respectful and prestigious Central Army Commander, he lived and dined like a common soldier. He would eat the unpalatable dried vegetables, sleep in the muddy grass and fight side by side with any other soldier. He stayed until late every night dealing with affairs of importance; he even took shift on guard duty. Every night he was the last one to rest, and every morning he was the first one to rise.

The soldiers loved him; they admired him; they would carry out his words to the letter and without question.

It was the officers who were worried. No matter how high the morale was, a battle could not be won with morale alone. Many have tried to make their case to him over the weeks.

“Sir, it is time to retreat!”

“We have done more than anyone could have asked for. We crushed hundreds of thousands rebels. We have done enough!”

“Sir, let the men rest. We have fought continuously for almost fifty days, and

run a distance over five thousand kilometers!”

Every time, Stirling would listen closely to their pleas, and agree with them wholeheartedly: “Yes! You are right! I agree with everything you just said!”

Next morning, when the time came for Stirling to assign new orders, he would always casually brush everything aside saying: “Stay the course.”

Naturally, it caused his officers to complain fervently. Some thought Stirling was being too harsh, some even believed Stirling was gambling with the soldiers’ lives, using their sacrifices as his stepping stone to riches and prestige.

Even Supreme Commander Luo Ming Hai warned him several times through his letters: “Sir Stirling, your recklessness and stubbornness has endangered our war efforts in the Far East. If another Battle of Red Lake occurs under your watch, I assure you, the court martial is the last thing you will have to worry about!”

Even when all his officers misunderstood him, even when the High Command threatened him, Stirling did not say a word in his own defence. In his heart, his personal honour was completely irrelevant.

The only question plaguing his thought was: why after so many victories, defeating one rebel army after another, the situation in the Far East had not improved one bit. The Far East was still in turmoil; the rebellion was still at large.

It was just like Di Lin mentioned in his letters: “Hundred victories would not turn the tide, but one defeat, and all would be for naught.” His situation was like treading on thin ice. He had to contain superior enemy forces with very little of his own, keeping hundreds of thousands rebels in check and preventing millions more from joining the Rebellion. He could only keep winning; he could not afford to lose!

Even though he had crushed hundreds of thousands Rebels already, Stirling knew none of it really mattered: The Rebels was like a nine headed hydra, cutting one off, another head grows right back! They were easily defeated, but once the tide turned, they would come back even swifter. So what does he need do to win this war?”

He firmly believed, the only way to truly stop the rebellion was to root them out at their source, to wipe everything out all together! The Rebel Army might

have been defeated, and might look weak, but Stirling knew, the Rebel Army's strength never truly diminished. They were only temporarily stunned by his rapid attacks! If he allowed them to recover, House ZiChuan would have to pay a toll in blood hundred times heavier if they ever wanted to quell the rebellion in the future.

Headmaster ZiChuan Shen Xing was the only one who understood Stirling at the time. In his letter to him, there were only a few words: "Your troubles, I understand. Your heart, I know."

When Stirling first read the letter, he burst out in tears: He never sought rewards for any of his efforts; he was only trying to serve the House the best way he knew how, and at the very least, Headmaster understood his noble intentions.

Sometimes, all you needed in life was a friend. The danger of the battlefield, the endless devotion, the tireless efforts and the pain of not being understood, everything was suddenly worth it.

A moment of hesitation later, the Officer in charge of the First Cavalry Division, Wen He finally asked the one question everyone wanted to know the answer to: "Sir, do we....."

Stirling did not answer; he merely turned towards the sea of soldiers dressed in black lining up behind him. They were hungry, exhausted. Their sleeves were torn and their uniforms were barely holding together. The way they walked was more akin to ghosts than men and their trembling hands struggled to keep the lances straight. Their skinny bodies trapped under the weight of their heavy armour made the riders look like a band of skeletal wraiths. Compared to the rows of excited soldiers in shining armor when they departed from Di Du, they were no longer the same. Stirling suddenly realized just how small his army had become!

Looking back at each young and languished face with their determined eyes, he couldn't help but think about how many young sons of the same age and the same determination would forever rest here, in a land far away from their pining loved ones. On average, there was a cross planted for a son of Di Du's every fifty meters along a three thousand kilometer long road, stretching all the way from the foot of Fort Warren to the Beach of Red Lake in the province of Yun.

Stirling felt haunted by the thought: What rights did he have, to ask these boys to give up their lives for his stubbornness?

He took advantage of their love and loyalty, and led them to their deaths. Was that a crime?

For the dream that one day House ZiChuan would unite the land, for the cause to return peace to the Far East, he had given everything he got. Had the Central Army sacrificed too much?

Was his decision really the correct one, will there really be a decisive battle that would bring an end to the war in the Far East?

Could an army like this really go through another battle?

He repositioned himself to face the entire army. His deep and coarse voice sounded clearly in every soldier's ear.

"Resting in front of us, are our Far Eastern Army's comrades. They fought bravely and valiantly. They died honourably in the name of House ZiChuan. What we must do now is to bury their bodies, and then....." Stirling closed his eyes, as tears streamed down the side of his cheeks: "We retreat."

A wave of uneasiness spread through the soldiers, but their excellent disciplines kept them from making a sound.

"Over the last month and more, you have gone through seven major battles, twenty five small battles, and two hundred and eleven skirmishes. You have not lost once! You have defeated enemies twenty times of your size! Your actions have made House ZiChuan proud. You have brought honour to the hawk flying over House ZiChuan's banner everywhere in the world! Your youth will not have gone noticed; your blood will not be spilled in vain. Believe in House ZiChuan, for it will not forget the bravery and loyalty you have shown to this day! I implore everyone, to continue with your efforts in this time of crisis. House ZiChuan needs you! Hereby, on behalf of House ZiChuan, I salute you; you have done well, brothers! House ZiChuan thanks you!"

Stirling saluted solemnly to everyone under his command, and the response came like a tidal wave: "We will follow you to the end of the world!"

Imperial Calendar, Year 779, September 15th, Stirling's Central Army had

taken control of the Beach of Red Lake in province of Yun.

On the same day, Stirling gave the order to retreat from Red Lake, leaving the province of Yun and thus, brought an end to the mad chase across the Far East.

On the day of September 21st, the revitalized Rebel Army began its frenzied counter attack, in an attempt to once again, sweep the Far East under its fury. After having regrouped and reinforced, Stirling's army stood its ground and nailed the great road into Yun's mountains shut. Like grabbing the Rebel Army by its throat, Stirling had firmly locked the Rebel Army inside the province of Yun.

And soon, a long drawn out battle began between the fifty thousand Central Army and the two hundred thousand Rebels over the control of Yun's mountains. If the rebels broke through, they would gain access to vast open plains of the Far Eastern Regions.

High Command immediately gave the order, urgently requesting Ming Hui to reinforce Stirling at any cost. They could not afford to let the bulk of the Rebel Army escape Yun. At the same time, the High Command had ordered the first group of the newly drafted militia to march for the Far East.

September 16th, City of Di Du and a night of stormy rains, an unwelcomed guest suddenly arrived at ZiChuan Ning's mansion.

The newcomer asked ZiChuan Ning candidly: "Is this where Xiu lives?"

ZiChuan Ning stared alarmingly at the newcomer. She was a graceful and mature woman. The way she called ZiChuan Xiu directly by his first name, ZiChuan Ning couldn't help but ask: "What business do you have with him..."

"Well. I'm his former lover. I'm here to get him to pay for the child support and the damages he caused to my youth."

The tea cup in ZiChuan Ning's hand splattered over the floor.

Seeing ZiChuan Ning's paled expression, the newcomer smiled bluntly and said: "Just kidding. But you really need to work on your sense of humor!"

Before ZiChuan Ning's heart rate and surprised look could return to normal, the newcomer had already put down her tea cup. She asked respectfully: "You

must be Lady Ning?”

“Coming here at such late hour without prior notice, I suppose it was quite presumptuous of me. I’m Far Eastern Army Deputy Commander – Lin Bing. I’m here on urgent business with Sir ZiChuan Xiu. Would you let him know?”

ZiChuan Ning exhaled in relief, but the calm only lasted for a second before Lin Bing sent her right back to hell with her next set of words: “This time, I’m here on official business. The child support and everything else he owe me, will have to wait.”

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ZiChuan Ning got up and told the servants to wake ZiChuan Xiu up while muttering to herself: “Now I finally understand why the people of Far East wanted to rebel...”

The moment ZiChuan Xiu saw Lin Bing, he instinctively straightened his back and saluted. Back when he was still serving in the Far Eastern Army, he had always paid extra respect to his candid and joyful female commanding officer.

Lin Bing returned the gesture: “I wouldn’t dare, Sir Xiu. We are of the same rank; we are both Deputy Commanders. You don’t have to be so modest.”

Even though on paper they both held the same rank, there was a big difference between the two. Lin Bing was a Deputy Commander with real power. She commanded over hundred thousand troops and was put in charge of million people’s welfares. She was literally a vassal lord. In comparison, a Deputy Commander like ZiChuan Xiu had to worry every month whether he would get paid or not.

ZiChuan Xiu replied sincerely: “No matter where or when, you are always my commanding Officer.”

Lin Bing clapped loudly: “You didn’t forget your past, that is good!” She went straight to the point: “I need you to help me save Luo Bo. He is in big trouble!”

During the Far Eastern Rebellion, Luo Bo and Lin Bing had to fight off nearly a million rebels with their weakened and wounded Army at Fort Warren. They waited desperately for reinforcement’s arrival, to the point they were about to take their own lives in order to preserve the family honour. Finally, the

reinforcement came in the form of Stirling's Central Army, but with them also came the Military Investigation Squad from the Ministry of Supervision. Bunch cold-hearted and atrocious army officers sought to investigate the cause for Battle of Red Lake's defeat. In order to not implicate anyone else, Far Eastern Army Staff Officer – Luo Bo took all the blames upon himself.

Despite several officers' complains and many soldiers' protests, the Judicial officers still dragged the heavily wounded Luo Bo from bed and put him in chains, escorting him to Di Du for Court Martial.

Naturally, Lin Bing followed their footsteps closely and arrived in Di Du as well, hoping to exonerate Luo Bo. However, since the death of Commander Ge Ying Xing, the Far Eastern Army branch had lost its most important and respected spokesperson to represent them in the heart of the decision making, the High Command.

Lin Bing continued infuriated: "Right now, the Far Eastern Army is like a bastard child. No one cares, and everyone thinks they can bully us!"

Especially after they found out that it was Supreme Commander – Luo Ming Hai who was behind the accusation, no one wanted to help.

After exhausting all her options, Lin Bing suddenly remembered, Luo Bo had a subordinate, who was always after his drinks, serving as a Deputy Commander here in Di Du. Even though she heard he wasn't doing so well for himself either, she had no other alternatives, might as well give it a try...

ZiChuan Xiu's had a serious look on his face. Luo Bo was his direct commanding officer while he served in the Far East. Back then, when Yang Ming Hua wanted him dead, it was Luo Bo, Ge Ying Xing and other officers of the Far Eastern Army who protected him, a naïve child in his teens. The reason that he could rise up from an exiled convict to the high rank of Banner Master within six years, other than his own merits, Luo Bo's patronage was also an important factor.

In other words, other than Commander – Ge Ying Xing who recently passed away, he owed the most of what he had to Luo Bo.

ZiChuan Xiu answered resolutely: "I owe everything I have to Sir Luo Bo. I will do everything in my power to secure for his release!"



Lin Bing was stunned by ZiChuan Xiu's determined gaze, and a wave of warmth washed over her. She had gone through so many of them over the last couple of days, and each time, she was kept at arm's length. Every time she asked for help, she was met with a wall of excuses:

"Well... about that; let me think about it."

"Believe in the High Command and the Headmaster. They will not put an innocent man in jail! He will be released soon, I'm sure."

Some gave her the sarcastic remark: "Three hundred thousand casualties. If Luo Bo is not the one responsible, are you the one responsible? You should worry about yourself first!"

And some even ridiculed her: "Who is Luo Bo to you? Why are you trying so hard to save an old fart...?" then followed their sentence with a lewd gaze, assessing Lin Bing's captivating figure. One even came in close: "Deputy Commander Lin, I feel we should get to know each other... As long as you are willing, I promise to help Luo..." Before he could finish, Lin Bing's two inch heels was already planted in his face.

Over the past few days, this was the first time she was given such determined affirmation. Even though it came from a powerless and insignificant Deputy Commander, it provided her with a great deal of moral support.

ZiChuan Xiu and ZiChuan Ning both looked surprised at the watery sparkles filling Lin Bing's eyes. ZiChuan Xiu asked confused: "Sir, you..."

He didn't know the right word to say.

As a fellow woman, even though ZiChuan Ning didn't know the reason behind it all, she understood very well how Lin Bing had to be feeling right now. She quickly interrupted her brother's line of questioning by handing her the handkerchief.

Lin Bing took the handkerchief and dried her eyes, quickly regaining her composure: "I'm sorry. I got something in my eye."

ZiChuan Xiu and ZiChuan Ning both nodded, accepting her clumsy excuse.

Lin Bing continued on the subject: "Xiu, Luo Bo was not wrong about you. Sir

Ge Ying Xing was not wrong about you. He had such high hopes for you.” When she mentioned the name of the deceased Far Eastern Army Commander, in her eyes there was more than just nostalgic admiration for the man, but also the look of an unexplainable sense of sadness. ZiChuan Xiu thought to himself: Lin Bing and Ge Ying Xing were probably more than just comrades in arms...”

“When Sir Ge Ying Xing died, I was with him the whole time. He once mentioned your name. He said that you were the only one who could bring peace and prosperity to House ZiChuan for the next hundred years.” ZiChuan Xiu was feeling flattered, but he responded modestly: “Sir Ge Ying Xing was too kind, I’m hardly that capable.” However, his big satisfied smile had betrayed his intentions, not to mention he kept making eye gestures, hinting at ZiChuan Ning: Do you see how great I am?

Lin Bing nodded: “I also thought it was impossible, perhaps Sir Ge Ying Xing’s mind had dulled by then.”

ZiChuan Ning burst out in laughter.

“He also said, after his death, Yang Ming Hua might be truly out of control. He was afraid that none of you would be able to stop him. He said if such day comes, I was to give you this box. He wants you to find the master of this box, and kill Yang Ming Hua! That was his words. I didn’t understand what he meant, but he said you would.”

Lin Bing handed him a small black ornate box, with a Golden Pansy flower carved on top. It was obviously an antique. Two hundred years ago, the Empire of Light used the Golden Pansy flower as their national symbol.

ZiChuan Xiu accepted the gift earnestly with both hands. He was awed. Even at the final moment of Ge Ying Xing’s life, he was still worried for the future of House ZiChuan, and how to preserve its eternal glory. How does one even speak of such unwavering loyalty!

Yet, the world often moved in a way we least expected. The outcome of Di Du’s rebellion, ZiChuan Shen Xing’s surprising victory and Yang Ming Hua’s quick demise were events even the wise Ge Ying Xing could not have predicted.

After Lin Bing left, unable to restrain her curiosity any longer, ZiChuan Ning quickly got hold of ZiChuan Xiu and bombarded him with a series of questions:

“Brother, who did Sir Ge Xing Ying tell you to look for? When Yang Ming Hua was the most powerful man in House ZiChuan, who could have killed him so easily? This box, it is an antique right? Who does it belong to?”

ZiChuan Xiu carefully put away the box. Unable to dodge her questions, he finally relented and responded with a few words: “Duke Zuo Jia Ming.”

ZiChuan Ning inhaled deeply, feeling the chill filling her longs. She kept her mouth shut.

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Every generation had its heroes; each directed the flow of its time.

Over the long history of the war ridden continent of Western River, many incredible warriors and heroes were born.

In the Militaristic Society of House ZiChuan, every generation had its “Number one fighter”. For example Lei Xun held the title not so long ago. In some sense, the trio, ZiChuan Xiu, Stirling, Di Lin who killed Lei Xun together, now shared one third of the title “Number one fighter”.

Contemporarily, the arch rival of House ZiChuan for the last hundreds of years, House Liu Feng also had its “Number one fighter.”

ZiChuan Xiu used to make fun of it: “In the hundreds of years of our combined history, if we add all the ‘Number one fighters’ all together, they could form a whole division.”

But amongst all these top fighters, there was only one who was recognized by all, every factions on the continent, to be the true number one.

“Number one fighter” of House Lin, Duke Zuo Jia Ming. A top tier fighter who had lived for over three hundred years.

Zuo Jia Ming was born during the twilight years of Empire of Light. He was quickly recognized for his incredible skills. He wasn’t even twenty one years old, when the Emperor of Light at the time, (The last Emperor of the Empire of Light) Lin Jian Yi made him the Head Advisor to the Emperor. He was given great power and even greater title, hence “Duke Zuo Jia Ming.”

Zuo Jia Ming was grateful for Emperor’s trust, and had sworn his loyalty to the

crown, but his relationship with the Empire didn't last long and fractured soon after. The real reason behind their break up however, would forever remain a mystery.

Some believed that the Field Marshal at the time, Lu Dan Yan was jealous of him and deliberately alienated him from the Emperor. And some believed that Duke Zuo Jia Ming was involved with one of Emperor's concubine, an unparalleled beauty at the time. (This version of the story was also the most commonly believed one. In the end, everyone wanted to hear about stories with Heroes and forbidden love.) Naturally, some denied anything of the sort ever took place, and there was nothing between him and the Emperor...

However, one thing was certain. When the Battle of Blue River reached its most critical moment, and its outcome could directly alter the fate of the entire Empire, the most powerful fighter of the Empire – Duke Zuo Jia Ming was fishing at the coast of the Western Sea, tens of thousands miles away from the greatest battle of its time.

In the end, the last Emperor – Lin Jian Yi, the Field Marshal – Lu Dan Yan, and the five hundred thousand soldiers of the Royal Army all perished on the open battlefield of Blue River.

A week after the battle took place, a young man dressed in white appeared in front of the Main Camp of the Demon Army, calling the name of the Demon General, demanding a duel.

The Demon Legion laughed at his face. Everyone thought it was a joke. The Demons had just annihilated the last remaining, and the most powerful Human Army. They were about to conquer the entire human world. Who would have time to care for the idiotic demand of a silly Human?

When the Demon General – Yun Long received the report from his scout who couldn't stop laughing, he simply gave the order without so much as raising his head: "Kill him."

A moment later, three thousand Demons' bodies lay sideways on the ground. The massive Demon Army, endless blades and lances, nothing could even delay the man dressed in white from moving through the camp. Everywhere he went, only death remained in his wake.

When the figure in snowy white walked with blade in his hand and into the Tent of the Demon General, Yun Long somehow managed to retain his composure: “I have never known someone as strong as you. What is your name? The times for Humans are at an end. Why would you not join us? We shall shape the future to our will! Fame, riches, anything you want...” (He spoke in Demon tongue.)

Duke Zuo Jia Ming gave him a frown, and admitted freely: “I didn’t understand a word you said.”

Unsheathe, stab, wipe the blood, retract, sheathe, turn and left.

Hundreds of thousands Demons watched silently as everything took place, overwhelmed by shock and terror, no one dared to even approach.

A Demon Officer who spoke the human tongue recorded the whole exchange in their Book of Records, called the “Divine Code”.

After the collapse of the Empire of Light, Duke Zuo Jia Ming became the central focus of all competing factions on the continent, but he politely refused every one of them (ZiChuan Yun, Liu Feng Heng, Ming Lin and many other faction leaders) with the simple phrase of: “I’m not interested.”

However, when the last Emperor, Lin Jian Yi’s daughter, the seven year old princess – Lin Feng Xi who was being hunted by other rival factions, came to him and begged: “Uncle Zuo, I have nowhere else to go, will you help us?”

Duke Zuo Jia Ming gazed deeply into the eyes of the child, and said: “I will.”

His decision came as a great surprise. One of the faction leaders he refused earlier, Ming Lin cursed indignantly: “But why? House Lin has no money, no army and no power! Zuo Jia Ming must be a bloody pedophile!”

Zuo Jia Ming never dignified that insolent remark with an answer.

A week later, Ming Lin was found dead in his own estate, a heavily guarded fortress. At the time of his death, no traces of foul play were discovered, nor did he suffer from any known illness.

Following his death, the covetous ZiChuan Yun and Liu Feng Yun quickly joined hands and destroyed House Ming, dividing his territories amongst themselves.

Not long after, a small faction, House Lin was founded on the continent of Western River. Despite its weak military, it was driven by an incredibly large economy of unprecedented wealth.

In that Era of war where the strong and the powerful destroyed the weak and the small, House Lin was like a pig made of gold walking down the street without a leash. The only thing stopping the other factions from wiping them out was the number one fighter of all time, Duke Zuo Jia Ming.

Naturally, over the course of hundreds of years, not everyone believed in the myth. Like the fourth generation Headmaster of House Liu Feng, Liu Feng Rui.

Unable to resist the temptation any longer, he gave the order to invade House of Lin, a small faction with no respectable military strength, in possession of greatest amount of wealth and holding the richest land of the entire continent.

When the Army of House Liu Feng effortlessly reached of the defenceless Capital City – He Qiu of House Lin, Duke Zuo Jia Ming also effortlessly wiped out the entire House Liu Feng's Army trying desperately to fend him off, killing Liu Feng Rui in the process.

The younger brother, Liu Feng Li became the next Headmaster of House Liu Feng, and his motto was: "Never give away what you have taken!" He refused to retreat from House Lin's territory. He even deployed the elite of House Liu Feng's army, the "Knights of Wind" to defend the Capital, in an attempt to defeat Duke Zuo Jia Ming for good.

Soon, Liu Feng Li died as well and the embodiment of House Liu Feng's highest form of military strength and combat prowess, the "Knights of Wind" was defeated. Over seven thousand riders, half of them were dead, and half of them were crippled.

Within the week, House Liu Feng welcomed their third Headmaster, Liu Feng Di. He was the unlucky one. He didn't want to be the Headmaster in the midst of crisis, but he lost the bet and was forced by his compassionless brothers to take the seat.

He said: "I'd rather die than to become the Headmaster!"

House Liu Feng's elders and nobles replied in unison: "Even if you die you have

to take the seat of Headmaster!”

The first order he gave as the Headmaster was: “Retreat from He Qiu immediately!” He was terrified of the idea that Duke Zuo Jia Ming would come for him at any minute.

Since then, no one had dared to invade House Lin ever again, and Duke Zuo Jia Ming had also firmly established his position as the undeniable “Number one fighter of all human kind”.

Well, at least that was what the story suggested. It had been hundred years since then, but it remained to be the most classic and the most legendary story in the world of Western River.

It was said that Duke Zuo Jia Ming had left the Capital – He Qiu after the war, and went to travel the world. No one had ever seen him again, but everyone strongly believed: He was still alive and true to the promise he made that day, to always and forever defend House Lin’s honour.

No matter when or where, if any one ever dared to threaten House Lin in anyway, they would have to answer to his invincible blade...

.....

ZiChuan Ning whispered softly: “After all this years, Duke... is he still alive?”

ZiChuan Xiu answered casually: “Probably. That old fart still owes me shit tons of money. You better hope he is still alive somewhere!”

ZiChuan Ning was stunned.

Meanwhile, ZiChuan Xiu had something else on his mind. He was caught in the moment when he made the promise to Lin Bing, but how was he going to save Luo Bo?

Headmaster – ZiChuan Shen Xing was no doubt the most powerful person in the Capital, but... ZiChuan Xiu shook his head: ZiChuan Shen Xing probably felt the same way about him as he felt about ZiChuan Shen Xing right now... which was... “Great.” He was certain.

What about Supreme Commander – Luo Ming Hai? ZiChuan Xiu stopped himself, not even considering the option.

Looking sideways at ZiChuan Ning sitting beside him, ZiChuan Xiu shook his head again. Even though ZiChuan Ning would be the next Headmaster, no one really cared about the seventeen year old “Reserve Headmaster” right now. Even ZiChuan Xiu didn’t take her seriously most of the time.

Central Army Commander – Stirling would no doubt be a good option, and a good friend. Besides, he recently won a big battle, and he had Headmaster’s trust. His words could easily sway Headmaster’s decisions in his favor. The only problem being, he was fighting a war in the Far East, thousands of miles from where he needed him to be.

Out of all the members in High Command, only Fang Jing could be considered as a friend, but he had been ill lately and should be resting at home, away from the Capital.

After pondering for a while, ZiChuan Xiu could only think of one person: He had Headmaster’s trust, the power and influence to turn the tide. He controlled the Ministry of Supervision and Court Martial was under his direct jurisdiction. Most importantly, he was his “good friend”.

Inspector General – Di Lin.

The only problem however, was that ever since the coup in the Capital, ZiChuan Xiu had purposely tried to avoid his “good friend”. Now if he was to visit him only in time of need, would Di Lin even want to help?

Imperial Calendar, Year 776, May 7th, Far Eastern Army Academy...

“Fellow students, welcome to the Academy! Let’s begin.”

Newly appointed Banner Masters from all over House ZiChuan had signed up for the advanced military studies at the Academy, and over fifty of them attended the class taught by a sixteen year old Deputy Banner Master – ZiChuan Xiu.

“The subject of today is the Art of War. ‘Move like wind, Compact like forest, Fight like fire, Unmoving like mountain!’<sup>[1]</sup> So what does it mean? It is quite simple really. It basically says, when you are on the run from your enemies, make



sure you run faster than wind, and hide in trees whenever possible. In case enemy set fire to the woods, then you may as well be ‘unmoving like mountain’ and die. Everyone got that? Good, next.”

“‘War, vital to a nation, matter of life and death, the path to survival or to destruction.’<sup>[2]</sup> In other words, war is our livelihood. Without war, we would be without a job, and without job, we wouldn’t get paid... Our Headmaster is a generous ruler. He intends to let us keep our jobs. That is why he keeps fooling around with House Liu Feng on the other side of the river. So let’s not make his job more difficult than it already is. If someone accidentally wipes out House Liu Feng, we will all be sleeping on the streets!”

“Here is another quote on the same subject: ‘Without capable men from within, without dangerous enemies from abroad, a nation wouldn’t last.’<sup>[3]</sup> The meaning is obvious. In order to remain strong as a nation, the key is to stir more trouble and make more ‘enemies’ from outside. Only then will the nation be ‘everlasting’.”

“What if the enemies are too strong?”

“Too strong? If you can’t win by force, then try diplomatic solutions! Are you stupid or something? Did you bribe your way to the rank of Banner Master? There are many ways to resolve a conflict without bloodshed. We have international treaties, conventions and Humanitarian principles. Show them that we are vivid supporters of world peace. Just reason with them all right? Anything works! If House Liu Feng for some reason wouldn’t listen however, that would be a whole different matter all together, which is unfortunately beyond the scope of our class today.”

The officers quietly mumbled to each other: “Where did they find an idiot instructor like that?”

“Sir Ge Ying Xing personally invited him as an Instructor for the Academy. I heard they are close relatives or something... But why did you choose to attend his War Stratagem Class knowing he was a bloody idiot?”

“Why do you think? For the good grades of course. As long as you take the test, you get an A+, even if you don’t you still get a B+. It doesn’t even matter what you write on the test paper at all, as long as you get your name right, you

get a bonus! Besides, he never starts his classes on time, always leaves before the half time mark, and he never assign any homework... Where else do you find an instructor like that?!”

Another officer raised his hand, asking: “Sir, can you explain what this means? ‘Accessible ground, entangling ground, temporizing ground, narrow ground, precipitous ground, distanced ground.’<sup>[4]</sup> And how it affects us in actual battle?”

“Nice. Finally a good question. A meaningful question, a timely question, an educated question, a thoughtful question, a...”

“Sir, please answer the damn question!”

“Hey, slow down. How could I not know the answer to such simple question? Let’s see, it is like this. The question is in fact a different question, I mean like. Ha. See, you’re getting it now. That wasn’t too hard was it? So... was that clear?”

“Not at all!”

“Sigh, I didn’t expect you to be this stupid. Very well. I’ll have to find someone with similar intellect to explain this to you! Comrade Stirling, wake up, stop napping during my class!” ZiChuan Xiu forcefully shook Stirling’s chair.

“Instructor Xiu, I’m too dumb for this. I don’t understand the question at all.” Stirling quickly followed up with a whisper: “You are paying for next week’s meal at the Golden Pavilion!”

“Comrade Stirling, feel free to take your time, I’m sure you know the answer!” ZiChuan Xiu followed up with a whisper as well: “Fuck off, that’s like daylight robbery! Fried noodles at the noodle shop. My treat!”

“Sir, I still can’t think of anything!” Stirling whispered again: “Final discount: Five meals at the Golden Pavilion Restaurant!”

“Comrade Stirling, I have faith in you, believe in yourself!” ZiChuan Xiu whispered back: “This is a bloody extortion! Three nights of fried noodles, that is final!”

“Urgh, I’m going to faint, Sir!” Stirling rolled his eyes backwards, toppling from his chair.

ZiChuan Xiu caught him as he fell, shaking him profusely: “Wake up! Hold on!

Comrade Stirling!” While whispering: “Fine! You win! Golden Pavilion it is!”

“Aha, Sir. I think I remembered!” Stirling, who was barely conscious a moment ago, suddenly regained his vigour, answering loudly: “So called Accessible Ground is a place where both you and your enemy can come and go as you please. In a place like that, it is important to seize the high ground first, secure the side that faces the sun and protect your supply line. Entangling Ground is a place that is easy to get in but hard to get out. In a place like that, it is only recommended to attack the enemy if you can catch them off guard, however if they have fortified themselves, it will be very dangerous. Next up, a place that is hard to attack into for either party is called the Temporizing Ground. In a place like that, your best option is to defend and ignore your enemy’s provocation...”

“Good. That was not too terrible of an answer. You got most of the basics right at least... So, was that clear?” ZiChuan Xiu turned towards Stirling and reprimanded him harshly: “Comrade Stirling, I’m so very disappointed in you! It took you forever to come up with an answer to such a simple question. What would you have done if you were on the battlefield right now, where death could come at a moment notice and your decision could decide the fate of thousand of soldiers’ lives? Do you really expect your enemies to give you time to think about it first?”

Stirling lowered his head in shame. He was terribly ashamed for having disappointed Instructor Xiu’s expectations.

ZiChuan Xiu continued angrily: “What is a genius? A genius is ninety-eight percent of sweat and two percent of inspiration! If you think you are clever, and do not work hard, you will never achieve anything in life! Stirling, I will see you in the Dean’s office this instant! Everyone else, it is self-study time!”

.....

The duo left the classroom.

“Hey, Xiu. Was that a bit too much? You ended the class in just over ten minutes! Also, didn’t you already use this excuse the last time you skipped class? I mean, I have totally lost track of how many times you have called me to the Dean’s Office so far.”

“No way, you remembered it wrong! Last time it was your Parkinson’s disease

acting up and I had to bring you to the infirmary... And if that class goes on any longer, I'll have to declare bankrupt! Where did Di Lin go? Why isn't he at the class today?"

"He went to collect the protection money."

.....

In an enclosed dark alleyway, several lower ranked students at the Academy were forced into a corner. Through the unspeakable terror reflected in their eyes, Di Lin's alluring smile slowly approached: "Hello there. How is your day? Are you hungry?"

A slightly brave one answered: "Boss, we already paid last week..."

Before he could finish, Di Lin's big army boots already landed square on his face.

Di Lin gently handed him a tissue for the blood coming out of his nose as he continued to speak with a smile: "Just because you took a shit last week, does that mean you don't have to shit this week? Last time it was for the hundred-and-twenty-fifth Anniversary of His Highness, this time it is to celebrate the two-hundred-and-fifty-third birthday of our great founder, ZiChuan Yun. Those are two completely different things! As a future officer of House ZiChuan, do you not feel proud to be able to celebrate a historic day like this? Do you not feel the patriotic fever burning inside you? If not, I will be very disappointed..."

Di Lin cracked his knuckles loudly, showing his intense patriotic feelings and how "disappointed" he was to the "lack of patriotism" in his fellow officers.

Seeing Stirling and ZiChuan Xiu coming around the corner, the few low ranked officers immediately cried out for help: "Help! Sir Xiu! Di Lin is forcing us to pay him protection money!"

"Comrade Di Lin, you are bullying other students again! Looks like I will have to punish you severely this time! ZiChuan Xiu declared with indignation: "Fear not, fellow officers! If Di Lin dares to bully you again, report to the instructor's office and I will skin him alive! Remember, you'll need to file a report!" While his voice overflowed with righteousness, ZiChuan Xiu quickly dragged Stirling away from the alleyway...

Di Lin looked back at the few disappointed low ranked officer with a nefarious smile: “To let you in on a secret! Sir Xiu and I are thick as thieves! Anyways, enough with that. It is time to show your patriotism with your actions! But know this; I hold a serious grudge against those unpatriotic bastards!”

.....

Later, in the peach forest behind the academy, Di Lin gave Stirling and ZiChuan Xiu a candy bar each.

ZiChuan Xiu seemed disappointed: “That is all?”

Di Lin replied: “Not much I can do. It is the economy. Can’t even be a mafia nowadays. Nobody seems to have any money.”

Stirling furiously devoured the candy bar while trying to speak: “I don’t approve of you guys bullying the other students.....”

Di Lin frowned at him: “Stop eating it then if you hate it so much... You are always the first one to finish it too!”

Stirling instantly shut up, and swiftly finished the left over candy.

ZiChuan Xiu spoke: “Did you hear? The officers from the Advanced Study program will be allowed for an early graduation next week!”

“Yeah!” Stirling said: “We heard! There are simply too many vacancies everywhere. They can’t wait to put us on active duty. I volunteered for the Border Army. Di Lin, where do you want to go?”

Di Lin smiled: “Border Army is good! That is where the battle against House Liu Feng is taking place, a good way to get some of those medals on your shoulder. I haven’t decided yet! I’m so envious of Xiu. He gets to live like a king and stay here in the Academy as an instructor!”

“Haha!” Stirling laughed: “I doubt that is going to last! Someone filed a complaint, saying that he was a failure of an officer and an instructor. I heard Sir Ge Ying Xing is considering moving him out of the Academy and send him to serve under Sir Luo Bo.”

“C’mon, Stirling. Some things are best left unsaid!” Di Lin could barely catch his breath from all the laughing: “Look at him. His face is all red! You better not

make him angry!”

“I’m angry now! No more dinner for either of you tonight!”

“You dare break your promise?! Does your ass itch for my boots?!”

“That is right! Fuck him up! Let’s see if he dares!”

.....

Golden Pavilion was the most exclusive restaurant near the Far Eastern Army Academy, but also the most expensive.

Stirling and Di Lin rushed forth in big strides, instructing the waiter: “We are going to bleed someone dry today! Bring the best of everything!”

ZiChuan Xiu followed behind with a troubled look, with the words “bitterness and severe loathing” written all over his face. Unhappy would be a grave understatement.

After the trio had their fill, Di Lin rubbed his belly in satisfaction, smiling: “I haven’t had this much for such a long time! I always feel so great whenever I get to enjoy a meal in Xiu’s expense, like everything just tastes so much better all of a sudden!”

ZiChuan Xiu touched his pocket briefly with his hands before quickly taking them back out. His face was all kind of strange. He asked: “I have got a question for the Mafia Boss – Di Lin, how many ways are there to properly do an eat and run?”

Di Lin considered for a second, and answered: “Number one, the way of cockroach and flies; Number two, the way of run for your lives; Number three, the way of food poisoning; Number four, the way of big bad wolf... But, why are you asking? Are you telling me you didn’t bring your wallet?!”

“I didn’t say that, but I brought something else as well with my wallet...”  
ZiChuan Xiu pulled his pocket inside out, exposing a huge hole in his pocket, the size just big enough for a wallet to slip through.

Stirling asked surprised: “Didn’t you lose your wallet the last time? How is it that you keep losing your wallet repeatedly, and each time with such impeccable timing as well?!”

ZiChuan Xiu explained: “They are totally different! Last time I was only faking it, this time I lost it for real!”

The trio exchanged a look, Di Lin sighed: “Very well. Normally a high class mafia like me wouldn’t resort to underhanded tactics like this, but...” As he said that, he unbuttoned his shirt and rolled up his sleeves. Like a madman, he rose to his feet, flipping over a plate of sweet and sour carp fish all over the floor. Not feeling satisfied, Di Lin kicked over another bottle of wine on his left, shouting: “Is this something you feed the pigs with?! I have never tasted something so bad in my whole life! I demand to have a word with your chef right now!”

ZiChuan Xiu held on to his stomach, screaming in pain: “Urgh, I have food poisoning! Help!”

Stirling hastily moved aside, avoiding any of the shattering glass.

One of the senior waiters quickly came forward to assess the situation and apologized: “Yes, of course! Please remain calm. Our chef will be with you shortly to address any complaints you may have.”

And that was the moment, when the most monumental event took place in the lives of the three young heroes of House ZiChuan.

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Imperial Calendar, Year 779, September 16th, Di Lin’s estate.

Inspector General – Di Lin spoke with a smile: “I still remember the look on your face when Lin Xiu Jia came out of the kitchen with the chef apron on. You were literally staring and drooling more than when you saw the sweet and sour carp fish being served for the first time.”

ZiChuan Xiu protested: “I was no way the only one drooling! What about you? You instantly put up your gentle face even though you just broke their plate. I remember you asking: ‘Miss, did you prepare the dishes? I have never tasted anything so good my entire life! Miss, I would like nothing more than to enjoy your cooking for the rest of my life!’ And that was the first time you saw her. Did you really think you were being romantic?”

Di Lin laughed: “What do you know? Girls dig that stuff. The sappier the lines the better! But Stirling was definitely the worst. He instantly turned on us: ‘Miss,

I'm telling you, both of them are up to no good. They are planning to do an eat and run! I'm the only good guy here!"

"I still can't believe he would betray us like that!"

ZiChuan Xiu agreed wholeheartedly: "Indeed. We were this close to finding out who the real Number One fighter of House ZiChuan was."

It was getting late; ZiChuan Xiu had bid his farewell. On the way home, ZiChuan Xiu kept thinking about what Di Lin told him before he left. The more he thought about it, the more he realized how incredible his words were...

"Xiu, I know, you are about to leave for the Far East soon. That Xiu's Company of yours, you know better than anyone what they are made of, so I won't bother. But you need to know what is going on in the Far East right now. We may win one battle, two, three, or even a hundred, but you will never win this war, no matter how many reinforcement we send. The reason is, we lack the deciding factor that can turn the situation around, and that kind of deciding factor is not something you can gain on the field of battle. I said the same thing to Stirling once, but considering what he has been doing, he clearly didn't hear a word I said. He is trying so desperately to plug the gap in the crumbling dam with his bare hands."

ZiChuan Xiu asked: "Then in your opinion, what is this deciding factor that can turn the tide in our favor?"

Di Lin shook his head: "I don't know. But do you want to hear one final warning?"

"Do tell."

"Whatever you do, never move further than three days of march distance away from Fort Warren. Always be prepared for sudden turn of events." Di Lin was being very serious.

Looking back, what was once an estate surrounded in lamp light, was now swallowed by darkness, shrouding it in an aura of mystery.

.....

Two days later, something unexpected happened in the City of Di Du: Inspector



General – Di Lin suddenly did a one-eighty, and began actively investigating Far Eastern Army Deputy Commander Luo Bo’s case. It seemed that he intended to make an example of him, as he declared resolutely: “I will make sure to involve the High Command with this, and show Luo Ming Hai who the boss is!” He even purposely spread the word that he would personally act as the prosecutor in this case: “I dare anyone to speak in his defence!”

The news quickly reached Supreme Commander – Luo Ming Hai’s ears. He only needed a few minute to consider before he took on a complete different stand, speaking greatly in Luo Bo’s favor. He even volunteered to be Luo Bo’s defender during the court martial, which the Headmaster - ZiChuan Shen Xing himself had promised to attend.

The court martial began as scheduled, but the entire trial had turned into Supreme Commander – Luo Ming Hai’s solo performance. He spoke vividly in Luo Bo’s defence; his every word filled with passion and strength: “The defeat at Red Lake was beyond the means of any one man! Despite the devastating loss, Luo Bo defended Fort Warren against all odds. He did House ZiChuan Proud. If we are still to punish him for his valiant efforts, how could we face the hundreds of thousands soldiers who are sacrificing their lives over at the Far East as we speak? His speech was received by a sea of applause coming from Lin Bing and the Far Eastern Army officers present at the trial. Luo Ming Hai seemed even more satisfied of himself as he basked in the glory of his triumph.

In contrary, Di Lin’s performance came as a great disappointment to ZiChuan Shen Xing and everyone else present. His words lacked common sense and were often out of place. His argument contradicted each other, and even his indictment failed to clearly specify whether Luo Bo was accused dereliction of duty or failure in his command. And thus it wasn’t too surprising to see his accusations being mercilessly torn apart and dissected by Luo Ming Hai’s counter arguments.

As a result, ZiChuan Shen Xing declared publicly, that Luo Bo was clear of all charges. After the trial, the way Di Lin stared in defeat could only be described as a dog who had just lost a fight.

Luo Ming Hai gave Di Lin a scornful look, before returning to happily receive the congratulations from his fellow men: “Congrats, Sir. You definitely gave Di

Lin a taste of his own medicine this time!” The words made Luo Ming Hai so happy that night he even made an exception and had a glass of wine.

“Huh, who told you that?” ZiChuan Xiu sounded surprised, as if someone had just found out about his darkest secret.

“Don’t even try to deny, Sir. Lady Ning told us everything. You are secretly the fifth generation disciple of the Number One fighter of all time – Duke Zuo Jia Ming. You’ve also mastered every technique he taught you, such as the ‘Wave technique’, ‘Lightning Blade’, ‘Thunder Kick’, ‘Iron Head’<sup>[1]</sup>, ‘Nine Swords of DuGu’<sup>[2]</sup>, ‘Buddha’s Palm’<sup>[3]</sup>, ‘Sunflower Manual’<sup>[4]</sup> and even the legendary ‘Hamehamea’<sup>[5]</sup>... anyway, you knew all the kickass stuff~!”

“Sigh, I told Ning many times to keep it a secret...” ZiChuan Xiu knew woman could be like children sometimes. If you wanted her to help you spread certain rumours around, the best way was to keep reminding her: “Don’t tell anyone!” And as expected, the result was impressive. It didn’t even take a full day before the trio came to him like dogs wiggling their tails, hoping to catch their master’s attention. All rumours naturally had the tendency to mass produce and mutate each time it did. In the end, ZiChuan Xiu was “confirmed” as Duke Zuo Jia Ming’s favourite disciple!

“Very well. I admit. That is the truth! I’m Duke Zuo Jia Ming’s fifth disciple!”

“Sir, don’t worry. We’ll guard your secret with our lives! We just... have a very small favour to ask...”

“Oh. I see. You want me to teach you some martial art techniques!” ZiChuan Xiu appeared to have come to a realization.

The trio nodded rapidly.

“But you should know, it is not like I don’t want to...”

Bai Chuan quickly pulled out a bag of coins, and Luo Jie dragged a box of Porn Mags behind him. ZiChuan Xiu exhaled in defeat: “Why do you guys keep doing this to me, what do I even say to that? Fine, since you all asked so sincerely, I’ll teach you the highest form of martial technique of Zuo Jia Sect, the Universal Invincible Thunder Palm Manual! For two thousand only! Anyone interested?”

Bai Chuan asked curiously: “So cheap?” She immediately paid him in cash and ran away as fast as she could with the manual.

Luo Jie and Chang Chuan realized too late what had just happened, crying like lost sheep: “Sir, help us! If that evil bitch masters the Thunder Palm technique, we’d all end up as her slaves for sure!”

“Hoho, worry not! Her Thunder Palm Manual is in fact incomplete, it has several weaknesses! I have another Great Sun Technique Manual here for sale. It is specifically designed to counter the Thunder Palm Technique, only for eight-thousand-and-eighty-eight and it is all yours! If you master this technique, I guarantee your victory over her! Also, when you do, will you ask her for me if she would be interested in the upgraded version of the Thunder Palm Manual, this time complete with all the extra’s, it will only cost her another ten thousand!”

.....

Next morning, Red Banner Master – Li Qing came to visit ZiChuan Xiu on behalf of the High Command. The first thing she saw after arriving at Xiu’s Company’s camp however, was Luo Jie crawling over the floor like a toad, with his head tilted in the direction of the sun and his mouth gaping wide. It sounded as if he was chanting some mnemonic phrase: “I’m an idiot... I’m an idiot... I’m an idiot...”

“Master Luo, what are you doing?”

“I’m an idiot... Please don’t interrupt me. I’m practising the Great Sun Technique by absorbing the essence of the sun. I’m an idiot... Once I master this, I’ll be invincible!”

Li Qing frowned at him, asking: “If I may ask, where can I find Sir Xiu?”

“I’m an idiot... Go through the front gate then turn right. I’m an idiot... The door with the naked girl poster hanging outside leads to his office!”

“Thanks.” Even after Li Qing had passed through the gate, she could still hear Luo Jie’s shout clearly from a distance: “I’m an idiot!” In fact, he was being so loud the whole camp heard him.

“I know! You don’t have to keep repeating it!” Li Qing shouted back without so much as a backward glance.

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ZiChuan Xiu quickly got up and greeted Li Qing as she came through the door. They had known each other and were friends for a long time.

Li Qing studied Xiu's Company's headquarter for a moment, posters of naked girls hanging on every wall, piles of stinky trash all over the floor, and more behind his old desk, dirty clothes, empty bottles, and even a few dead mice from several days ago.

She coughed slightly, complaining: "Xiu, what a nice bunch of soldiers you have! Did all of them just come out of prison?" She had made up her mind, without a brigade or a bigger contingent of guards, she would never again walk through Xiu's Company's front gate. Those lecherous gazes from the soldiers outside was short of nerve racking.

ZiChuan Xiu spoke with a playful smile: "What are you talking about? Don't I look normal to you?"

Li Qing replied with a smile without smiling: "Right, so reading an adult magazine right after the sun comes up is somehow considered normal here?"

ZiChuan Xiu hurriedly ditched the book underneath his bed, clearing his throat: "So what brings you here, Master Li?"

Li Qing retracted her smile: "Sir Xiu, by High Command's order, you are to gather your men... Hey! Let me finish... Stop, give me my orders back! Wait, don't open it... Sigh!" She complained: "I'm supposed to be the envoy here, show some respect, will you?"

"Xiu's Company will be placed under Commander Fang Jing's command, and shall depart immediately for Fort Warren."

"Strange, didn't they promise the new recruits a month to train? We barely have had two weeks! Not to mention we are still missing half of our equipments. Several of our squads don't even have the tents to weather the winter with."

"It is Supreme Commander's idea. The official reason is, the sudden development at the Far Eastern Front has demanded urgent reinforcement for Stirling. The real reason however, is Di Du's Police Corp. Their chief cried his eyes out to Luo Ming Hai, saying: "The City of Di Du will never have peace as long as

Xiu's Company remains here." He demanded your immediate removal. Xiu, do you even know what the people of Di Du think of your unit?"

ZiChuan Xiu answered with all the seriousness in the world: "Whenever the people of Di du see the magnificent banner of Xiu's Company, they would always show their respect and admiration: They are men of strength, the embodiment of righteousness... Such disciplined force, as expected from the young hero, ZiChuan Xiu!"

Li Qin smiled lightly: "Do you even believe that yourself? You know it better than anyone. Everyone calls you the three plagues of Di Du: cockroach, rats and Xiu's Company!"

Li Qing stood up and said her goodbye: "All right, that settles it. If there is anything you still need to do but haven't, I suggest that you make haste. Meanwhile, I can help you with your equipment problems. As you may or may not know, in order to get rid of you and your men as quickly as possible, the Logistic Corp has gone all out. You should take this opportunity and grab what you can from them."

"Oh, there is one more thing. I have a letter for Stirling. Since you are headed for the Far East, would you deliver it to him?" ZiChuan Xiu felt a jolt going through him. It had been so long since he kept the secret from her how Stirling loved Princess Ka Dan. If she hadn't mentioned it, he almost forgot that officially, Li Qing was still Stirling's fiancé."

"Remember, deliver my letter to him in person!"

ZiChuan Xiu quietly took the letter: "Ok." But his heart lamented: Woman are such fools sometimes, they think going to the Far East is like going to their backyard. How do they not understand the Far Eastern Front is an area stretching across hundreds of thousands square kilometers? Stirling's Army isn't a garrison unit either. How is he supposed to run into Stirling's forces in a huge area like that?"

He escorted her to the gate. Li Qing turned to him, staring deeply into his eyes as she spoke with deep sincerity: "Take care, and for Ning, please be safe."

ZiChuan Xiu felt another jolt going through him, but he kept a straight face: "Right, for our future Headmaster, we need to take care of ourselves."

Li Qing pushed her fine long brows together, as if she didn't approve of his answer. But without another word, she turned around and left.

.....

"Brother, you are back?" ZiChuan Ning seemed especially happy today seeing his unexpected return. "You even brought me flower... Woah, brother. That is so nice of you! I almost thought you forgot about my eighteenth birthday!"

"Today is your birthday?!" ZiChuan Xiu was shocked: He only bought the flowers in preparations for what he was about to tell her. He did not expect to stumble onto her birthday... Seeing how overjoyed she was holding the flower he gave her, he couldn't say a word of what he had planned: Should I really say those things to her right now?

Ka Dan came out of the room: "Let me see... Is it normal to give yellow daisies<sup>[6]</sup> to someone as birthday gift?"

"Ah, you are right! He is always a bit dim-witted that way!" Even though ZiChuan Ning complained, her face told a different story: As long as ZiChuan Xiu remembered her birthday, she would be just as happy even if he had given her nothing at all.

Luo Jie, Bai Chuan and Chang Chuan attended her birthday party as well. They kept saying: "We are here to cherish our friendship with Her Ladyship and congratulate her on her birthday!" But ZiChuan Xiu quickly saw through their disguise, they came here for the free and expensive gourmet. Bai Chuan brought her a cute makeup box, while Luo Jie and Chang Chuan, "two idiots who never had more than a nickel left in their pocket by the end of the month", brought her a bag of sunflower seeds together.

Luckily, ZiChuan Ning was in a great mood, she gave her sincere thanks to anyone who brought her anything. ZiChuan Xiu knew however, that she was usually very picky; she rarely cared for stuff made of common quality.

The meal was quite extravagant; it was a great eye-opener for the couple commoners from the Far East. Ka Dan smiled: "This reminds me of the Royal dinner back at the Imperial Palace."

During dinner, ZiChuan Ning raised her cup to ZiChuan Xiu, giving him her

blessing: “I wish you ever victorious and a safe return.” Only now did ZiChuan Xiu realize, Li Qing had to have told her of his new assignment already. He emptied his cup without another word, and everyone else quickly followed suit. Even Ka Dan and Bai Chuan who usually never drink had their cheeks flushed that night from the alcohol.

Everyone was having a good time. Luo Jie however, only sought out pretty girls to drink with. Sometimes he raised his cup in honor of Stirling fighting in the Far East, sometimes he did it hoping the peace would soon return to House ZiChuan, and every so often he gave his blessing to everyone who was about to depart for the frontline. He was being so overly courteous, even ZiChuan Xiu started to doubt whether he had any ulterior motives.

Was he trying to get the girls drunk, hoping to take advantage of them that way? Then again, it didn’t seem all that possible. Luo Jie was so simple-minded; he couldn’t possibly think that far ahead. It would have been a lot more suspicious if it was Chang Chuan.

The conversation kept going around the war in the Far East. Since ZiChuan Ning had a good friend like Li Qing working inside the High Command, she knew a lot about what was going on in the Far East.

Like how the High Command had plans to establish an unified command structure in the Far Eastern Theater, but they weren’t able to agree on the candidate who was supposed to be in charge.

Based on merits alone, both the High Command and the Headmaster supported Stirling, but Stirling had only been promoted to Commander recently. If they put him in charge, he probably would have a hard time controlling the old fox, Ming Hui who held the same rank. If they had to find someone else other than Stirling or Ming Hui, then the only suitable candidate would be the Supreme Commander – Luo Ming Hai.

When his name was mentioned, all the officers laughed. Luo Ming Hai was known for his lack of understanding for warfare.

Chang Chuan told the party a story of Luo Ming Hai: Once, he was put in charge of a battle. He could see House Liu Feng’s lancers coming his way. Yet, he just stood there, not saying a thing. When his men saw how calm and how

fearless he was, they instantly felt empowered by him and were able to repel the enemy attack. After the battle, when everyone started cheering, Luo Ming Hai dragged an orderly to the side in secret and asked: “Did we win or lose?”

It was a terrible joke, but everyone laughed hysterically.

...

Meanwhile, Ka Dan tugged at ZiChuan Xiu’s sleeves without anyone looking and he understandingly followed her outside to the hallway.

Ka Dan handed ZiChuan Xiu a letter: “Please, deliver it to him...” Obviously, she meant Stirling.

ZiChuan Xiu numbly took the letter from her, sighing. He had finally made up his mind: “Would you tell Ning to come out for a second?”

Ka Dan gave him a dubious look, and seemed amused: “I see, it is time for the quiet talk! Ok, I will go get her.”

A moment later, ZiChuan Ning came out: “Brother, what is with the secrecy?” Not sure whether it was the alcohol or something else, her cheeks were flushed.

ZiChuan Xiu smiled but didn’t answer her directly, saying: “Hold on.” He unsheathed the sabre on his side and flipped it in an arc behind him. The blade effortlessly penetrated the wooden door, and Luo Jie and Chang Chuan’s scream quickly followed.

After realizing she was being eaves dropped on, ZiChuan Ning laughed with delight.

ZiChuan Xiu channelled his acute senses as he scanned his surroundings. Once he was absolutely certain that no one else was around, he inhaled deeply, for what he was about to say required all the courage he could muster.

Under the clear sky, the sea of shiny stars watched the world in silence like countless pair of eyes. When the softening breeze of the nightly gale washed passed him, he could feel his senses sharpen as the dizziness of the alcohol slowly began to wear off.

“Brother, you seem troubled tonight. You barely said anything.” ZiChuan Ning’s voice sounded clearer.



ZiChuan Xiu slowly began: “Ning, I still remember. You were scared of dark when you were young. You cried a lot, and often for hours on end. Before your father ZiChuan Yuan Xing passed away, he told me to take care of you. But I’m a failure of a brother, in the end it was you who ended up taking care of me most of the time.”

“Brother, we are family. We are supposed to take care of each other. I know you have always protected me, even when I cannot see you. Do you really think I don’t know? That year, Di Du was in turmoil and Father wasn’t around. When the angry rebels bashed through the doors and scared the guards away, I was so scared I cried hiding myself under the blanket, it was you guarding at my bedside with a sword in hand. You were only eight years old. I remember, because I keep peering from under the blanket, and each time I saw your brave shadow in front of me. You made me feel safe.”

ZiChuan Xiu rubbed the back of his head: “Let’s not talk about that, I attacked the first person coming through the door, and he sent my ass flying. As it turned out, it was your father. I ended up spending the next week in bed.”

ZiChuan Ning chuckled: “But I think you look just as good when you got your ass kicked!”

The memories of their childhood filled them with emotions. ZiChuan Xiu smiled: “And now look at you, that fragile crying little girl has all grown up now. I have at least fulfilled that part of my promise to Sir ZiChuan Yuan Xing. Ning. We will forever be brother and sister, what do you say?”

ZiChuan Ning’s eyes widened: “We are brother and sister!”

ZiChuan Ning clearly didn’t understand what he meant; ZiChuan Xiu sighed in defeat, and tried again: “Ning, I’m leaving for the Far East soon and I may be gone for a long time.”

ZiChuan Ning replied calmly: “No matter how long it takes, I will wait right here.”

ZiChuan Xiu could feel the pressure mounting: “I may never come back.”

Her pair of eyes was as bright as the stars. She stared intensely at ZiChuan Xiu’s handsome face: “You will, and I will wait.”

ZiChuan Xiu was getting so desperate he wanted to kill himself: Why doesn't she get it?! He hesitated slightly but continued: "Yes. We are brother and sister, so of course you will wait for me! But what I meant was, while waiting for someone, you can do other things too, like hmm, like..."

ZiChuan Ning looked at him, slightly confused. In her memories, her carefree brother had never once been so lost for words.

ZiChuan Xiu mustered every last ounce of his courage: "For example, going out, get to know other boys of your age. That is right. I just realized you don't have any male friends. That is totally weird for a girl at your age."

ZiChuan Ning seemed surprised: "I have many male friends! Like Stirling, Luo Jie, Chang Chuan. I'm good friends with all of them"

ZiChuan Xiu didn't know if he should laugh or cry: "I'm not saying all guys are also friends... Hmm, wrong, what I meant is, not all male friends are also that kind of 'friends'."

He tried his hardest to come up with something, he finally thought of a good example: "Like, Ka Dan and Stirling that kind of 'friends'."

ZiChuan Ning's eyes widened even more: "That kind of 'friends'?"

ZiChuan Xiu sounded certain: "Yes, that kind of 'friends'!"

"You want me to find that kind of 'friends'?"

ZiChuan Xiu nodded in silence.

ZiChuan Ning stared at him; she had no words. Slowly, sparkling bubbles began to appear in her eyes. It was a feeling too difficult to describe. As if she was about to cry, her elegant form began to tremble slightly in the dark.

ZiChuan Xiu steeled his heart and pretended to not notice. He turned and looked down at the roses planted in the garden behind him, as if he had suddenly developed a keen interest in botany.

The endless silence seemed as if it would stretch to the end of the universe. Just when ZiChuan Xiu was about to give up and turn around, footsteps sounded from behind him, moving further and further away. Leaving together with the sound, was also his most precious first love.

By the time he turned around, the white dress had slowly disappeared from sight, vanishing behind the darkness at the end of the hallway.

He just stood there, unmoving. The girl's face from moment earlier kept flashing before his eyes. It was filled with untold sadness.

He laughed as if he mocked himself: "ZiChuan Xiu, you are the worst that ever was, there is nothing but hell for you now."

Looking up, in the midst of the shining stars far in the distant sky, it was as if a pair of angry eyes stared at him. The passing of time had not diminished its power over him one bit. And once again, the thunderous shout sounded next to his ears: "Ling He, don't you dare forget who you are!"

ZiChuan Xiu titled his mouth slightly: Yes. I know; she is royalty. She is not meant for a fatherless bastard like me. I also know; the name ZiChuan is but a layer of gilded gold. With the slightest touch, the smallest hole, it would expose the ugly and cheap bronze underneath. In the end, when it comes to the honourable name of ZiChuan, I will always be an outsider.

Why else, after seeing me and Ning getting along, did you send the nine year old me to the distant Far Eastern Army Academy without a second thought? If they really saw me as one of your own, would Yang Ming Hua really have dared to arrest me back then without elder's permission? And given my abilities, why is ZiChuan Shen Xing now the Headmaster of the House and not me?

In the end, gilded gold is still not real gold! Sir Yuan Xing, father, is this the outcome you have always intended for me?

The shiny stars looked again like ZiChuan Ning's teary eyes. I'm so sorry. Ning. Today is your eighteenth birthday. I shouldn't have made you cry. From this day forth, begins the most beautiful and dazzling moment a woman can have. But a woman's beauty is always fleeting. I don't want you to waste your precious youth on waiting for something that wasn't meant to be.

Goodbye. Ning. Forgive me for my heartlessness. When your vision is now longer limited by my shadow, you will realize the world has many more fine men out there worthy of your love. If the day comes, when you truly become the Headmaster, I wonder, will you know how I have felt at this moment? And if the day comes, when you and your beloved walked down the aisle hand in hand, will

you still remember the kid you used to love?

By then, I would probably be in a place far away, silently watching you from afar. You would only need to call out my name, and I would instantly appear before you, no matter how many mountains or seas I had to cross.

My beloved lady, may you live forever and your beauty everlasting.

And I, would protect you till the end of days. My life is yours and my heart as well.

Eight thousand soldiers and officers from “Xiu’s Company” departed from Di Du that night, heading for the Far Eastern Front.

When ZiChuan Xiu left ZiChuan Ning’s Mansion that night, he did so quietly and didn’t wake her, leaving only his house key and over a year worth of rent behind on the table in the Guest Hall.

Looking back, ZiChuan Ning’s room was pitch-black.

He sighed. Racing forth on horseback, he left the place he had called home for over a year.

Behind her pitch-black window, the curtain was secretly pulled to a gap, a pair of bright eyes closely followed the shadow casted by his broad shoulders, all the way until his dark blue officer uniform completely merged with the sea of light brown soldier's uniform in the background.

ZiChuan Ning prayed silently: “God, my only wish for my eighteenth birthday is – please keep him safe.”

And her tears rained.

“Ambush!” Scout’s warning quickly turned into a scream as a handcrafted javelin pierced the soldier’s chest with pinpoint accuracy, signalling an array of javelins raining down on their position and turning that single scream into a dozen.

When under attack, the soldiers from the Central Army immediately narrowed their ranks, forming a circular defensive formation. Wielding sword with one hand and shield with the other, the shieldbearers instinctively formed the outer

circle. Hundreds of square-shaped shields pushed together into a defensive wall. Archers, grouped in the center in a half kneeling position, returned the favour, unleashing a barrage of arrows over the shieldwall and towards the depth of the forest. Javelins continued to rain in, but most simply fell short in reaching the soldiers hiding behind the shieldwall.

The Captain, Banner Warrior – Dukla shouted: “Fifth platoon, attack! Bring me the heads of those underhanded bastards!”

Thirtyish sabre wielding soldiers roared: “Woaah!” as they charged towards the dense forest of shrubbery. Even though they were initially Cavalries and due to the inaccessible terrains in the forest they had to fight on foot, it did nothing to change their fearless style. Three soldiers fell to the incoming spears during their charge, but the rest all managed to close in on the enemy, surrounding over a dozen Beastmen in melee.

Beastmen fought back just as valiantly with their simple javelins against the sharpened sabres, completely ignoring the soldiers shouting in Beastmen’s tongue – “Surrender and be spared!” Blood, screams and death continued to stalk the muddy jungle after the rain. Neither side gave ground. A Beastman who had just lost one of his arm fought on holding the javelin in his other hand, another who had his shoulder crushed pounced on his enemy with his teeth. On the other side, a soldier with a broken leg continued to swing his sabre wildly, slashing at his enemy’s feet while tumbling over in the mud.

Soon, over half of the Beastmen had either fallen or were incapacitated. Captain Dukla shouted backwards: “Make way for the archers! Finish them!”

Several rows of archers moved forward, just as they were about to notch their arrows and draw back their bows, sudden warcry sounded all around them. Hundreds of Beastmen poured through the dense forest wielding javelins and clubs alike, surrounding them and hungry for blood. Soldiers readily fell back behind their defensive formation, and another brutal battle began beyond the shieldwall.

Dukla realized the situation he found himself in. “It was a trap!” He shouted loudly: “Fifth platoon, fall back to the defensive position!”

Three dozen soldiers from the fifth platoon separated from the battalion tried

desperately to get back, but over a hundred club-wielding Beastmen had already surrounded them, roaring. Everywhere around them, weapons clashed and no quarters were given. Several of the soldiers instantly had their heads caved in and their bodies torn apart, turning a few screams into an endless wail.

Dukla's battalion struggled desperately trying to narrow the distance between them and those separated men, but several hundred Rebels had severed their path. Both side fought fiercely over every inch of the ground, felling either men or beast every second in a pool of blood. Even though they could already see and hear each other, they were unable to move an inch closer despite being less than thirty meter apart. It looked like the surrounded fifth platoon would get wiped out before Captain Dukla could reinforce them.

A clear whistling and a shadow flashed by, not sure how, but it broke through several layers of the encircling enemies and through to the surrounded soldiers. A not-so-tall human nimbly moved between the taller enemies with incredible speed with nothing but his bare fists, dropping a score of Beastmen left and right without so much as making a sound, no one even saw how he did it. The bulky Beastmen who were well known for their physical prowess fell like flies around him and a tight encirclement was suddenly torn into a gap, allowing the surrounded soldiers to escape and return to the main unit.

Seeing the ambush had failed, a slightly taller Beastman' officer shouted a few unintelligible words, and instantly, what was once a large group of angry Beastmen scattered like scared rabbits in all directions, disappearing into the shadows behind the overgrown underbrush. Thus, they vanished as sudden as they had appeared.

Gone was the sound of combat in its place came the chirping of the birds, the falling of the raindrops from the trees and wailing of the wounded still lying on the ground. In the once again quiet forest, the dim sunlight on a late autumn afternoon barely shone through the heavy foliage, leaving speckles of brightness against the green moss of the jungle, over the murky puddles and on the pale faces of the young fallen warriors.

Soldiers breathed heavily, gasping for air. Their muscles tightened, their fingers clenched firmly around the sabres, and their eyes filled with bloodthirst scanned their surrounding constantly, seeking out their next target. They couldn't believe

that the soul-stirring battle had already ended.

Dukla was the first one to regain his senses; he shouted the order: “Don’t just stand there like idiots! Help your wounded brothers! And you there, cut down a few trees and make stretchers.”

Like waking from a nightmare, soldiers awkwardly unpacked their med kit, patching up the wounded, checking whether the person on the ground was still alive and if they could capture a surviving rebel as hostage.

Only now did Dukla remember: “Who was the brave soul who rescued my men?”

Several archers pointed him towards a young soldier examining the area: “He did! He saved our brothers; he is a hero!”

“That is me.” Feeling slightly embarrassed, the young soldier smiled mildly while showing his white set of teeth... Unfortunately it was about the only clean place left on his face. Everywhere else was practically covered in mud. Even though he wasn’t very tall, he looked like a man capable of holding his own. His gazes were sharp and focused. His uniform was covered in mud and blood; one couldn’t even tell what colour it used to have. He seemed to have lost his hat somewhere during the battle as he searched methodically through the battlefield.

“Good work, son. You fought well! You are not from my unit right?”

“Right, I’m just passing through. You must be the Captain...?”

“Right your ass!” Dukla roared: “Didn’t your officer teach you anything? When you are talking to a superior officer, you need to use honorific and do so with conviction. Say: ‘Right, Sir! Yes, Sir!’ Now try again!”

The amiable young man smiled and stood at attention: “Yes, Sir!”

“Good, now you look like a soldier! Very well, tell me your name, rank and your unit. I will make sure you are rewarded!”

“You are too kind, Sir.” The young man showed a pleasant smile: “My name is, Stirling. I’m currently serving in the Central Army; rank – Central Army Commander and a member of the High Command... So, when are you planning

to reward me, Sir?”

He finally found his hat. Shaking off the dust and wiping off the sludge, the golden hawk badge once again shone brightly on top.

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“Sir, you are acting out again!” Central Army Staff Officer - Tang Ping complained, he sounded as if he was talking to a child unwilling to take his medicine: “You were only supposed to inspect our defences, how did you end up in the frontline again? What if something happens...”

“Exactly!” Second in command, Deputy Commander Qin Lu chimed in: “All the division leaders are complaining: ‘We welcome Sir Stirling to inspect our defences, but can he please not rush into battle every opportunity he gets? We cannot afford if something happens to Sir Stirling!’ Sir, we all know how brave you are, but as the Commander of the Army, your duty lies beyond that of a normal soldier. You are responsible for our overall strategies, planning and leading us in battle...”

“Yes, yes. I know.” Stirling hastily changed the subject: “Today I went to check up on the three divisions on our left flank. Lu Ning’s division did a decent job on the defences; good trench work. Wen He’s division was terrible, not a single person knew what they were doing. I walked through his territory for almost half a day, not even a single guard stopped me for questioning, and his trenches were more like ditches, so shallow no way a soldier can hide behind. There was even an idiot Captain who led a small force of three hundred men into the forest, trying to stir up trouble for the rebels. Didn’t I specifically give the order: ‘Never chase into the forest?!’” By then, Stirling’s voice was throbbing with anger.

Qing Lu hurriedly explained: “Wen He’s division was originally a Cavalry division. They were used to be on the offence, not defence. All his officers were not trained to hold the line. I will talk to him about this later.”

“We can’t attack anymore. Our casualties are way too high. That damned forest; we’ll never have enough bodies for that!”

Stirling sighed, his voice turned from angry to stern: “Wen He must be held responsible for his negligence. Tell him, he has been demoted, from Red Banner Master to Banner Master. He will however remain as the commanding officer of



the third division. Warn him, if he messes up again, he can go report to the constables himself.”

Both Qin Lu and Tang Ping couldn't help laughing: It was already the third time Wen He got demoted this week, and every time Stirling sounded seriously angry. Yet, every time he managed to find some excuse to promote him right back to his old position.

It wasn't just Wen He, almost every officer knew, Stirling was strict but fair. When serving under his command, one could easily get promoted, but could very easily get demoted just the same. Stirling had a zero tolerance policy for failure. Almost all of the officers had to regularly check in with the Staff office first thing in the morning, asking: “Am I still a Banner Master today or Red banner Master?” or “What? I'm only a Banner Warrior now?! I was still a Deputy Commander just yesterday!”

Finally, Tang Ping found the opportunity to inform Stirling, the Acting Commander of the Black Banner Army – Ming Hui had arrived. He had been waiting for him at the Army Headquarter.

Stirling was overjoyed. Ming Hui's arrival signalled the presence of the powerful Black Banner Army nearby. The soldiers of the Central Army would no longer have to fight without support and would finally have time to take a breather!”

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Inside the simple and crude Headquarter held together by branches and sticks, two highest ranking officers in the Far Eastern Region met face to face.

Stirling saluted: “Greetings, Commander. As ordered, I've held the line.”

Ming Hui returned the courtesy: “Greetings, Commander. As ordered, I'm here to provide support.”

Ming Hui and his escort wore the identical deep blue uniform; their snow white gloves were spotless. In contrast to their polished black boots, the golden epaulettes on their shoulders shined brightly under the sun. Each of them looked well rested. On the other hand, Central Army Officer's uniforms were more like filthy rags. Every one of them looked completely exhausted with their muddied

bandages wrapped around their body. Some of the officers even came to the meeting stripped to their waist and having half of their foot exposed through their rotten boots. Even the highest ranking officer, Stirling wasn't doing much better either. Covered in sludge from top to toe, he didn't even have a hat on when he came to welcome the guests, which could be considered as an unacceptable behaviour for someone of his stature.

Black Banner Army officers exchanged a look amongst themselves, revealing their imperceptible intention to laugh. Was this what the most elite army of House ZiChuan looked like? They were hardly much better than a group of baggers.

Normally a high level meeting between two major armed forces was a very important and historical moment, but Ming Hui spoiled it completely when he whined: "Stirling, don't you guys in the Central Army eat? We've come a long way and we are tired. Not a single person has offered us anything to eat."

Stirling smiled bitterly, apologizing: "I apologize on behalf of my men. Prepare dinner for Sir Ming and our other guests, now!"

Deputy Commander Qin Lu returned with a pained-look. He was in charge of the logistics, and his motto was: "You can take my life, but you can't take my food!"

Seeing how determined Stirling sounded, he hurriedly gave the order: "Prepare the dinner!"

Freshly cooked rice was quickly prepared. Several Central Army officers immediately turned sideways, hiding their famished look from their guests... the alluring scent of the rice was too much for them to bear...

Ming Hui asked curiously: "Stirling, don't you want to eat?"

Stirling explained: "I already ate with my men earlier, please pay me no mind."

Ming Hui laughed: "I see, so even the great Stirling has learned how to cut corners. Indeed, the soldier's meal is pretty good, but why isn't there any meat? Stirling, you are being too stingy, hiding all the good stuff from us. I know you have it difficult here on the frontline, but it is not like I'm asking you for fresh steaks or fish or something, how about some cured pork meat at least?"

Stirling and his men looked at each other. In the end it was still Stirling who answered bitterly: “I’m sorry, I don’t have any. Once I catch some wild rabbits or boars tomorrow, I promise I will send some of them your way.”

Ming Hui was too hungry to argue. Despite his constant complaints he still finished his meal in record time, all the while instructing Stirling: “If soldiers don’t eat well, then they won’t have the will to fight. That is why, when it comes to war, having the necessary provisions is the most important! Stirling, you have much to learn still!”

What he really meant was, he had tasted more salt than Stirling had tasted food. An inexperienced brat like him better not try to take the Far Eastern Front Commander position from him!

Standing on the side, all the Central Army officers looked angrily throughout the entire exchange. The Central Army had to depart abruptly from Di Du due to the urgency of the rising threat in the Far East. They were given no time to gather all the necessary supplies before they had to set off for the battlefield. Not only that, they had to fight deep behind the enemy lines, exposing their supply lines to constant cut offs. On the other hand, not only did Ming Hui’s Black Banner Army purposely arrive later than supposed to, they constantly avoided any frontal engagement with the enemy forces while stripping every province they passed through of all its usable resources. Yet, he had the gall to mock them in front of their faces.

Central Army Staff Officer – Tang Ping finally lost his cool: “I have had the pleasure to read Sir Ming Hui’s incredible reports, killing seven million rebels in a week. I doubt anyone in the history of ZiChuan can outdo what you have accomplished, Sir!”

All the Central Army Officers barely kept themselves from laughing out loud. They despised Ming Hui and his fictitious reports. Apparently he had single-handedly killed all the rebels; we might as well all go home now!

Ming Hui wiped his mouth, uncaring: “Thank you. I’m just doing my duty as a servant of ZiChuan!” As if he couldn’t detect any hint of sarcasm in Tang Ping’s words.

Stirling gestured with his hand, stopping any of Tang Ping’s further attempts.

He already had the honour to witness Sir Ming Hui's "thick skins" in action when he took part in the campaign against Liu Feng Shuang back at the western border, and it was "thicker" than Stirling's, ZiChuan Xiu's and Di Lin's combined. Mocking him would be like trying to poke a hole in a set of metal armor with a bundle of hay, it wouldn't even tickle. Otherwise, Ming Hui would never have run as fast as he did whenever he saw Liu Feng Shuang's Army.

After the dinner, the meeting officially began.

Stirling explained the situation of the Central Army to Ming Hui: "The Central Army left the Capital with a force of hundred fifty thousand, of which fifty thousand were Cavalries and hundred thousand were Infantries. After the battle at Fort Warren, the Great Race of the Far East, and the defensive operations around the Forest area of Yun... We have suffered over forty thousand casualties, most of which were Cavalries. From the initial fifty thousand Cavalries, we barely have twenty thousand left. We have also run out of spare horses, in other words we have lost most of our mobility. The soldiers are tired and sickness is common. Therefore, I request the Black Banner Army to take over Central Army's defence line for the mean time and let us recuperate."

Ming Hui listened attentively while holding his chin. He cleared his throat and said: "About that... It's problematic! Sir Stirling. As you know, my Black Banner Army is originally the reserve force guarding the border to House Lin. None of our soldiers have any real combat experience. I'm afraid they won't be able to hold the lines. Besides, we came a long way; we need time to recuperate too! Also, none of us are native in the Far East. Many of us haven't yet acclimatized to the region. Many of my men are sick, greatly affecting our battle capacity. In addition, we have lost our supply of fresh fruits recently. Everyone has been complaining..."

Listening to Ming Hui's long list of excuses, Stirling was about to burst: Black Banner Army hasn't acclimatized; is everyone from the Central Army born in the Far East then? Over half of my men are suffering from dysentery! You have run out of fruit supplies; all we have are wild vegetables. You claim none of you have any combat experiences, is everyone in the central army naturally born accustomed to war? Not to mention, it is a lie anyway. Black Banner Army already took part several times in the battles against House Liu Feng!

Stirling managed to suppress his anger, asking: “Since the High Command’s order was for your army to support ours, what kind of support does the Black Banner Army wish to provide?”

‘Well, my advisors already proposed a plan to me before I got here, and I believe it is a good plan! Someone bring me the maps!’

Ming Hui began to draw on the map: “Here is the forest area leading to Yun. The bulk of the rebel forces are concentrated within. The blue line represents your current defensive positions. We plan to deploy around the line marked in red to support the Central Army in your efforts and wipe out the rebels together!”

Stirling was this close to completely losing it: The red line Ming Hui just drew for the Black Banner Army positions were almost entirely behind the blue line of Central Army’s current defensive positions. He sounded sincere when he said: “wipe out the rebels together.” In reality he fully intended to hide behind the Central Army to preserve his strength.

Stirling quickly got hold of his temper. In the end, Ming Hui was not under his direct command. He didn’t have the authority to give him any orders. The best he could do was going through the High Command or Headmaster – ZiChuan Shen Xing to give him an order indirectly. Unfortunately he found himself in a place thousands of kilometers from Di Du, sending a message and receiving it would take weeks. Besides, he couldn’t be certain if the High Command or ZiChuan Shen Xing would approve his suggestion. Even if they did send out the new order, Ming Hui could voice his protest, telling his side of the story. They were both members of High Command; it was within their rights to do so. With messages going back and forth, who knew how long it would take for the case to finally be settled.

But the situation in the Central Army couldn’t wait; they really needed time off the frontline. Every day was like years and every day they would lose hundreds of soldiers to hunger, sickness or any other non-combat related issues. Instead of saying they could still keep fighting, it was probably more accurate to say they could still get out of bed. All of his men were about to become walking corpses at this point.

Stirling had no choice but to put up his best manners when talking to Ming Hui, but no matter how passionate or how hard he tried to reason, to promise or to plead. Ming Hui would still remain the old slippery fox that he was, responding to every request the exact same way: “About that... It’s problematic!”

Stirling seemed to have lost all of his confidence, he even let an unthinkable thought cross his mind: He considered to wait until Ming Hui’s forces has settled in, then take his men and move under the cover of the night, never to return, leaving Ming Hui to deal with the Rebel Army on his own. But then again, he knew he would never do something like that. If that bastard Ming Hui followed his example and left as well, who would be left to defend the forest? It had cost him dearly to pacify the few surrounding provinces, if the Rebel Army was allowed to spread through the Far East again, who could bear the responsibility?

Unknowingly, the night had dawned on them. Ming Hui got up and took his leave: “It’s late. Let’s continue our conversation another time. I need to get back.”

Stirling ran out of ideas. He couldn’t possibly hold him hostage, can he? All he could do was leaving a group of Central Army Officers and their troubled looks behind.

Stirling forced himself to sound confident, instructing: “It is all right. The war goes on with or without the Black Banner Army. We still got a dinner to eat.”

The orderly brought everyone their “dinner”. A big pot of wild vegetable soup so thin one could see their own reflection on the surface of the liquid. Normally there was a bit more substance to their wild vegetable soup, but they had already gone through today’s allotment of ration when they made the dinner for Ming Hui and his escorts. So that was all they had left.

Stirling poured a bowl of watery soup, with barely any vegetable in it. He smiled bitterly and reminded himself: The key to drink wild vegetable soup is to drink as much as you can, until you are so full you can’t drink another drop, and hold your pee for as long as you can because the hunger will quickly return once you do.

While everyone worriedly consumed their meal, Ming Hui’s joyous voice sounded from the entrance: “Aha, Stirling, you terrible liar! Keeping all the good

stuff for yourself again only to take them out when after I'm already gone! Luckily, I caught you red-handed this time! I want some of that too." It was too dark for the Black Banner Army officers to find their way back, and so they had to return to the Central Army's base camp, planning to stay for the night.

Ming Hui looked curiously over Stirling's shoulder before he could cover everything up: "Let's see, so what have you been hiding from me?"

Just one look, Ming Hui's face turned sour: "That is all you got?"

Stirling was too embarrassed to speak. Tang Ping muttered a few words under his breath: "If not this, what else? You ate everything we got for today."

Ming Hui held his silence for a moment, finally opening his mouth: "Give me a bowl." He poured himself some of the soup, but it took him only one sip, before the sickening expression found its way to his face. He pushed the bowl to the side and stared at Stirling: "How long has it been?"

Knowing he could no longer hide it from him, Stirling answered truthfully: "Two weeks. We haven't received any supplies for a while now."

Ming Hui's looked very intense. He couldn't believe the slick and political savvy officer from moment earlier was the same person standing in front of him: "Why didn't you report?" hurriedly correcting himself, he added: "Who did this? Luo Ming Hai? Why don't you file an impeachment?"

Ming Hui already knew the answer. It was Luo Ming Hai being jealous of Stirling's accomplishments in war. He was afraid of Stirling surpassing him and overtaking his position. He did this on purpose to hamper Stirling's efforts.

Stirling answered honestly: "I have no proof of such, and anything that can lead to potential troubles for the Headmaster, is a fault of mine." He didn't want to fight Luo Ming Hai as well while the House was already in peril.

Ming Hui pondered for a long while, then speaking slowly: "Stirling. You are a good man! But I'm not a coward! I won't make any promises, but two weeks, my Black Banner Army can managed that much at least! Tell you men to fall back."

Stirling was delighted. He gave Ming Hui a deep bow: "On behalf of everyone from the Central Army, we are incredibly grateful to you, Sir Ming Hui. I'll be in you debt!"

Three days later, the Black Banner Army had overtaken the defensive position to replace the Central Army. Over hundred thousand soldiers from the Central Army, since the war in the Far East first began, were finally allowed to take a breath of fresh air as they retreated to the province of Deja nearby.



# Purple River - Chapter 7.1

## Move out

“Everyone got that?!” Bai Chuan nervously drew a long oval shape on the blackboard, then added a smaller circle on top, representing the head and a few straight lines on the side, representing the limbs. Looking unsatisfied, she added few more lines inside the smaller circle on top, symbolizing the eyes, mouth and nose. Finally, she nodded like having a weight off her shoulders. Clapping her hands in satisfaction, she said: “That is what a Beastman looks like! Everyone take notes. Those are our enemies! If you see anyone looking like that, you know what to do!”

The soldiers muttered to themselves: “Why does it look like a tree?”

“What are you on about? It clearly looks like sugar-coated haws<sup>[1]</sup>!”

“Wait, check out Master Luo Jie, no wonder he is so mean to us all the time, he is in fact a Beastman in disguise!”

“Shit, you are right. He really does look like one. Let’s fuck him up for being such a dick to us earlier!”

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As a “veteran of war”, the “fake Beastman” was telling his war stories to the new recruits: “Back then, I stood all alone surrounded by three thousand Demons on my left, three thousand on my right, and ten thousand in front of me, and even more...”

“No way, Luo Jie. It was nowhere near that many. You remembered it wrong.”

Standing next to him, Chang Chuan corrected him with an honest tone, saying: “I counted it; there was only nine-thousand-eight-hundred-and-ninety-five. That is all.”

“And then the Demons pounced on me with everything they got, shouting and swinging their weapons. Huehue. If it was any of you, I’m sure you would be pissing in your pants right now.”

“Indeed, bravery is a rare trait nowadays amongst the youngsters.” Chang Chuan added, sounding like an experienced warrior knowing what he was talking about.

“But for a battle hardened warrior such as myself, it was like everyday’s business! I just sat there, waited and lit my pipe. I didn’t even bother looking at them... Erm, I forgot what brand of tobacco leaves I smoked. Chang Chuan, do you recall?”

“Damn that brain of yours. Weren’t you smoking the San Wu leaves?”

“Aah. Yes! I spit a smoke ring at them, making an perfect circle. Then without blinking, I gave them the finger and raised my chin provocatively, meaning: You better all come at me at once; it would save me the effort to hunt down each one of you later.”

“Sigh.” Chang Chuan exhaled, sounding apologetic: “That is so typical of Luo Jie, barbaric and uncivilized. You guys better not follow his footsteps.”

A young recruit immediately asked, sounding anxious: “And then? What happened next?”

“Well, those bastards just all came at me, and with one move, I just...”

“He just died a terrible death. His body was torn apart by the Demon legion, spilling his guts and brain juice all over the floor. Luckily a few ants who were just passing through found the kindness in them to ‘take care of’ his rotting remains, leaving only a set of chalk white skeleton lying in the bushes. You can still find it sitting there as we speak.” Not sure when, Xiu’s Company’s commanding officer, ZiChuan Xiu had arrived as he commented coldly.

“Sir!” Luo Jie and Chang Hui leapt to their feet and saluted.

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The soldiers from “Xiu’s Company” might seem incredibly brave and invincible when brawling in the streets of Di Du, but they’d much rather spend their time

eating, drinking and relaxing than marching long distances under the searing sun.

“Fuck this shit! I have never needed to do something so painful my entire life!”

“The sun is killing me. It is putting wrinkles on my flawless face!”

“Yeah man, riding on horseback is terrible, my legs are completely sore!”

Everyone complained fervently, threatening to mutiny. They thought they could scare the meekly looking ZiChuan Xiu into submission... Well, it had worked every time they tried this before. Despite Bai Chuan kindly warned them not to: “Commander Xiu is in a terrible mood right now, you better not poke the bear!” They had no reason not to try it again as they each handed in their protest letter, deciding to stay in the City of Storff, and refusing to leave.

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That very same night, a horrifying shadowy figure appeared in front of their camp. ZiChuan Xiu asked in a dangerous tone: “The platoon threatening to mutiny is staying over there?”

Bai Chuan, Luo Jie, Chang Chuan, the trio nodded rapidly, terrified of saying anything wrong.

“Wuhehehehe.” ZiChuan Xiu let out a creepy laughter that would send chills down their spines: “Wait here.”

With that, he pushed the gate open and glided through the darkness.

It didn’t take long before the soul tearing wails began to echo through the nightly sky of the city, waking every child from their dreams and leaving them crying for their mothers.

Other soldiers who had participated in the mutiny trembled in fear as the night went on. No matter how many blankets they covered themselves with they could not stop the ghoulish cries from piercing through and getting to their ears. It was safe to say, they didn’t need much convincing afterwards as they quickly tore up their protest letters.

An hour later, the horror had finally stopped, but the eerie silence that followed made their hairs stand on end.

Suddenly, the door opened a crack and it was ZiChuan Xiu who crept his way out, saying casually: “They are sound asleep.” Then he dusted off his hands and left.

A soldier, barely alive, crawled out from under the same door moment later, screaming for help: “Tell... tell the Officers! A monster... that looked a lot like Sir Xiu... ambushed us... the others are...” Before he could finish, he spat a mouthful of blood and fainted.

Bai Chuan shouted: “Medic! We need help over here!”

Luo Jie whispered: “Did you see that? That is what happens if you fuck with Sir Xiu after he just got dumped.”

Chang Chuan could feel the pain of the horrors that had just befallen the young soldier lying in front of him. He prayed: “Gods, if you are out there and can hear me, please help that idiot find a girlfriend, or we will all be dead soon!”

“Amen!” The trio agreed wholeheartedly.

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The second morning before the sun even came up, without any of the Officer’s urging, the soldiers were already gathered, lined up and ready to move out. As the trumpet sounded loudly over the horizon, the songs of blood and steel followed.

Everywhere ZiChuan Xiu went, the soldiers would talk loudly amongst themselves, emphasizing on how energetic they felt today, and how they couldn’t wait to get to Fort Warren!

“Yeah man, the sun is great, the horse is great. Everything is great!”

“Same here, a hundred mile a day is nothing, we should ride at least three thousand miles today!”

In the world of thieves and thugs, the one with the biggest fist is always the Boss. Since ZiChuan Xiu’s fist was bigger than a whole platoon’s fifty fists combined, he was without a doubt - the Boss!”

Besides, Boss ZiChuan Xiu was quite “considerate” to begin with, and very “reliable”.

Back at the tavern in the city, after a few of the soldiers had lost a fight against a group of local thugs, ZiChuan Xiu immediately led a battalion of five hundred strong and helped them get their pay back by beating the crap out of the thugs and sending them running with squeals of terror and delight.

And when they arrived at the provincial capital of Dharma, the local logistic officer refused to supply them with provisions, saying: “Xiu’s Company? I have never heard of this newly created band of criminals.” ZiChuan Xiu shouted on the spot, and gave those few officers including a Banner Master a beating they would not soon forget. In the end they had no choice but to cough up everything they owed and more.

Naturally, it greatly pleased his band of criminals. They loved nothing more than to hear others beg for mercy on their knees. And soon, a saying began circulating amongst the soldiers: “Our commander is like an angry lion! And he is very protective of his cubs!”

Every time they passed through a city, ZiChuan Xiu would always offer his men a few days off, and each time, the soldiers would cheer back: “Long Live Commander Xiu!” as they scattered throughout the city searching for taverns or brothels..... In some ways, their admiration for ZiChuan Xiu truly came from the heart, since they knew they wouldn’t be able to find an even more “considerate” Boss anywhere else in this world.

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Bai Chuan complained angrily: “Sir, what about our orders? The High Command wants us at Fort Warren...”

“Aren’t we on our way there right now?”

“But the time...”

“The order was to march for Fort Warren; it did not specify when we have to arrive.”

“But the Constables...”

“Inspector General – Di Lin is my big brother. You have nothing to worry about!”

And that ended any objection she might have had.

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In the evening of each mini-vacation, ZiChuan Xiu would always order the trio to stay guard at the empty field camp while changing out of the army uniform himself and going out on his own. And each time, he would disappear as soon as he went out of the gate while humming a joyful tune, only to return a little before the next sunrise, looking completely exhausted.

Bai Chuan cursed: “Fucking idiot! He is going to die sooner rather than later!”

Luo Jie lamented: “Ever since Lady Ning dumped Commander Xiu, he had been venting his pain through meaningless one night stands!”

Chang Chuan voiced his discontent: “Sir Xiu is such an ass, hanging us out to dry while having all the fun himself.”

He had tried to follow him several times; the first time, a few thugs got in the way and he lost track of him; the second time, he was stopped by a girl of ill-repute on the street, and by the time he managed to get away, ZiChuan Xiu vanished again; the third time, he was arrested by the local police on the suspicion of illegal male prostitution, and ended up spending the night in jail; the last time he got knocked unconscious in a dark alleyway, by the time he woke up he had lost everything of value.

During daylight, a lot of visitors would come looking for ZiChuan Xiu, both men and women. They all had a strange and wicked look on their faces, and they moved with such secrecy as if they were mafias here to settle a drug deal. When they got into ZiChuan Xiu’s room, they would talk for a long time behind closed doors, and when they leave, they would sneak out through the back entrance without raising any attention.

By the time Xiu’s Company was on the move again, a group of mysterious travellers would have appeared behind them, dragging a long row of caravans following them day and night. When the army moved, they moved, and when the army stopped, they stopped, always within a hundred meter distance. Every time Xiu’s Company passed through another city, the group of traveller would get bigger. By the time they reached Fort Warren, the band of men and women had grown to almost three thousand in size, and over hundreds of caravans, a

size that could rival an entire army.

Bai Chuan kept getting more suspicious. She finally went to ask ZiChuan Xiu. ZiChuan Xiu sounded embarrassed when he gave the answer: “It is entirely my fault. You see, I have been strapped for cash lately. I promised I would pay them as soon as I got to Fort Warren. So that is why they have been following us...” Before he could finish, Bai Chuan’s sabre already reached for his throat.

Chang Chuan had other explanation concerning ZiChuan Xiu’s answer: “Bai Chuan is such an idiot; she is so clueless at times. We are both men. I can see through his tricks from miles away. There is no way he can fool an experienced player such as myself.”

He said to Luo Jie: “Just think about it. How many days has it been since we left Di Du? In such a short time, do you really think it is possible for Sir Xiu to owe over a thousand courtesans their nightly fee? He may be ‘strong’, but he is not that ‘strong’ ok?”

Luo Jie suddenly realized: “Right, that doesn’t make sense. There is no way he could be that ‘strong’! So what do you think is going on?”

“Clearly, there is only one possibility.” Chang Chuan stated angrily: “He must have brought male aphrodisiac with him! What a cunning bastard, keeping all the good stuff for himself!”

Imperial Calendar, Year 779, October 6th, Xiu’s Company’s eight thousand riders had arrived at Fort Warren.

# Purple River - Chapter 7.2

## **Xiu's Company fighting the Rebels**

Below the high walls of Fort Warren, ZiChuan Xiu received his first set of orders from a messenger on horseback. In the document, Commander Fang Jing, whom the High Command had put in charge of the militia operations in the Far East, ordered ZiChuan Xiu to march for the Province of Kudesu directly to wipe out any remaining Rebels in the area, and not to enter the Fort.

Breathing in the fresh air surrounded by nature, gazing forth past the endless green stretching as far as the eyes can see and onto the magnificent mountain ranges over the horizon, ZiChuan Xiu and the three Banner Masters felt deeply, but none could put their feelings into words, only murmuring softly in their hearts: "We are once again back in the Far East."

As they began marching east from Fort Warren, no matter where they went, the terrible scars left by the flame of war had seared deep into this beautiful piece of earth called Far East.

Meanwhile, the frontline had shifted further eastward, but the lands still bore the mark of its terror. The fierce battles had set quiet villages alight, turning a prosperous city into ruin, covering a mountain of green in a lifeless layer of ash and drowning what was once a rich farmland with a sea of empty bones.

Along the main road, an endless stream of refugees and beggars hurriedly made their way west. Amongst them, there were many humans but also many other races native to the Far East, mostly women, children and the elderly. They looked hungry, exhausted and desperate in their eyes. Whenever they spot a large human army passing through, they would group up around them in the blink of an eye like flies to manure, begging for anything they could spare. A couple of times, Xiu's Company had to resort to using whips in order to break free.



For them, it didn't matter whether you were the allied army of all races shouting "An independent Far East, home to the free and brave!" Or House ZiChuan's human forces carrying the banners of "Pacify the rebels, restore the peace!" They only wanted that piece of worthless bread. With it they could last the day, without it, they might not survive.

When Stirling was passing through the area, he had shed his fair share of the tears for the horror that had befallen the locals. He tried his best to resettle them to the peaceful areas west of Fort Warren, safe and away from the flames of war. As long as they could survive he thought, but his other duties demanded him to be elsewhere, leaving him with little time to deal with matters such as this. In the end, the majority of the refugees still had no home to return to, and no place to go.

That was what Lei Hong's ambition had brought to the Far East, nothing but devastation and war.

Officers like Luo Jie, Chang Chuan, who were born in the Far East all looked incredibly grim. Through the mouths of the refugees, they were told that their home town, the province of Minske no longer existed on the maps, their families, friends, all missing. Seeing the horrible sight before her, Bai Chuan couldn't help crying. It was ZiChuan Xiu who made the decision, to withdraw a portion from their daily provisions to aid the refugees... Everyone knew it was a foolish attempt; it wouldn't solve any of the real problems, but not one person protested. Looking at the overjoyed faces of the refugees holding a small piece of bread, it put everyone's mind at ease, albeit only a little.

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About three weeks ago, Stirling's Army engaged Lei Hong's Rebel Army in a fierce battle near the province of Kudesa. The result was Lei Hong retreating while leaving thirty thousand corpses behind. However, a big portion of the retreating forces ended up scattering in all directions, taking refuge in the surrounding mountains and forest, unwilling to leave.

Most of them eventually turned into local bandits, too scared to face any of House Zichuan's armies head on, but whenever they encountered small groups of guards transporting supplies or delivering messages, they would rob them of

everything.

Unfortunately, due to the overwhelming number of bandits, their great elusiveness and mobility, and the location of their hideout, which was often found in the most dangerous and deepest part of the mountain forest, they had made themselves incredibly difficult to root out.

The troublesome situation had caused numerous headaches for the Commander of Fort Warren - Fang Jing who was in charge of all the logistic operations in the Far East. Since he didn't have any extra regular armies at his disposal, knowing ZiChuan Xiu was born in the Far East and familiar with the local terrain, he had requested for Xiu's Company's deployment.

A new report came in from a messenger the day of their arrival: A group of Beastmen had just ambushed the supply convoy, requesting Xiu's Company's immediate assistance. By the time ZiChuan Xiu arrived at the scene, he could only watch as Beastmen's shadows vanished in the distance, leaving a road of wreckage trailing behind them. Under Cavalries relentless pursuit, the trail eventually led to the dense forest where the Beastmen had disappeared into. In response, Xiu's Company surrounded the entire forest, sealing off any path leading in or out of the area.

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"Brothers from the allied Army of all races, you are completely surrounded! Lay down your weapons and come out. The Army of House ZiChuan offers preferential treatments for anyone willing to surrender, there is no need for us to fight!" Luo Jie shouted loudly alone facing the dense forest.

"That is right! Keep going; make sure they can hear you!"

"Tell them, there is food and drink for anyone willing to surrender! If not, then there is only death!"

"Also, remember to say that in their language! They don't understand a word you are saying right now."

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Behind a wall of shields, ZiChuan Xiu manicured his nails, all the while encouraging him on with words.

Bai Chuan talked to Chang Chuan in a serious tone: “I heard the Beastmen had those handcrafted javelins, and they are super lethal. It can pierce through our armour with ease.”

“No wonder, just look at the size of their arms. Besides, I heard they dip their weapons in poison. Even the smallest wound can be deadly!”

“I see... Shall we start praying for Luo Jie’s soul?!”

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Behind the trio, several thousand Xiu’s Company’s soldiers and officers held their breath as they watched the brave Banner Master - Luo Ji in action. It didn’t take long before the discussions began: “Everyone look, Sir Luo Jie’s face is turning paler by the second, like a dead pig!”

“How is it that on such a chilly autumn day, his sweat has soaked through the back of his uniform? He is shivering from the cold as we speak.”

“I can barely hear him, as if he is afraid of being heard or something. Actually he sounds more like he is crying!”

“Sir Xiu, why don’t you send a few more guys over? We would look more threatening if we stand together... I mean... I feel a bit alone over here!” Luo Jie’s voice trembled slightly.

ZiChuan Xiu turned to look at the soldiers lining up behind him: “Any of you want to volunteer and help Master Luo out?”

Everyone shook their head with absolute resolution.

ZiChuan Xiu encouraged Luo Jie: “There is no need to be afraid. Even though you are standing over there all by yourself, we are right there with you, in spirit!”

Luo Jie replied: “Sir. I think I should stand a bit further back, that way we don’t have to shout to each other...”

ZiChuan Xiu answered without a moment of hesitation: “No need. My hearing is just fine.” He turned to Bai Chuan and Chang Chuan: “How about you guys, do any of you need to get closer?”

Both of them declared instantly: “Our hearing is perfectly fine, Sir.”

Luo Jie added: “Sir Xiu. I shouted for so long and I didn’t hear anything in return. The Rebels are probably gone by now! I think I should come back.”

“Just get closer to the trees and this time, put some more oomph in your voice!”

Chang Chuan whispered to Bai Chuan: “Something happened last night during dinner. Luo Jie somehow made Sir Xiu really angry. The next day, Sir Xiu immediately went and bought twenty contracts for Luo Jie’s life insurance, with himself being the sole beneficiary of all of them.”

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After Luo Jie had shouted for nearly twenty minutes, noises finally began to spread throughout the forest as a score of javelin-wielding Beastmen came out from the cover of the woods, rushing towards them and yelling: “Waguriguri! (Attack!)”

Luo Jie crawled and scrambled his way back to ZiChuan Xiu as fast as he could, reporting: “Sir, they are coming!”

ZiChuan Xiu shouted back: “Attack! Luo Jie, you are the vanguard!” and gave him a kick sending him tumbling right back where he came from.

The distance between the two groups quickly narrowed, and ZiChuan Xiu shouted: “Surrender and you will be spared! Do you really intend to fight? There are several thousand of us!”

All of a sudden, noises and shouts stirred from the backline: “Run for your lives!” and a few rustles quickly turned into an avalanche of earth-shattering cry, except that instead of getting louder, it grew quieter by the second, moving further and further away. A moment later, eight thousand Xiu’s Company’s riders had disappeared into thin air. They ran with such astonishing speed, it only took seconds, and all that left were a blurry line of shadows over at the end of the horizon and a large amount of dust floating in the air. When the wind finally washed over them, it still carried with it the faint sound coming from the distance: “Run! Don’t stop!”

Leaving only ZiChuan Xiu and three of his officers remaining as several dozen angry Beastmen surrounded them. Both sides were left stunned by the sudden

development. It took a while before a voice came through from the Beastmen, and it was spoken in Human language: “You want us to surrender?”

“Nope, nothing of the sort...” ZiChuan Xiu ditched his sabre right the way: “I was asking, if you would like to accept our surrender!”

“But weren’t you the one shouting ‘Show no mercy’ just a second ago?”

“That was him!” ZiChuan Xiu, Bai Chuan and Chang Chuan all pointed their fingers at Luo Jie: “We have nothing to do with that!”

“Hohoho... Xiu the Lightbringer. I haven’t seen you for a while, but you are still an ass.” A stout Beastman pushed his way through, his dark brown face cracked a wide smile.

ZiChuan Xiu yelled with joy: “Old man Dren!” Before he could finish, the Beastman already had him in his arms.

Back when ZiChuan Xiu was still a young Banner Warrior, he was stationed in the Village of Blue in the Province of Wargo. He taught the villagers how to make herbal medicine, how to farm the fields, taught the children the language of Humans and formed a great deal of friendships with the Beastmen living in the village. The villagers called him “Wagadaimu” (The one who brings the light). Dren was their chief. When he fell ill, it was ZiChuan Xiu who brought the military surgeon to the village and saved his life. They had been great friends ever since.

The two pushed each other around like good friends: “Hey old man, so what have you gotten yourselves into this time? Why are you rebelling?”

“Tch! You don’t know shit! After you left, came another officer. He and the landlord were ruthless. We just had a year of drought, and they still demanded us to pay their stupidly high tax. They started beating us when we couldn’t afford the tax, crippling several of our boys. We had no choice.”

The words made ZiChuan Xiu frown: “How is the village?”

“Not good. Only the elderly, woman and children are left at home, leaving no one to work the fields. All the men joined the rebellion, and many died without ever going back. Like the two kids from House Moody, they died at Fort Warren; the man from House Sam died too; and House Drew, three of their four kids are dead, and one is still missing. No one knows where he is right now, or whether

he is dead or still alive... Right, as you can see. Most of the villagers are here.”

ZiChuan Xiu looked around carefully, and indeed, there were many familiar faces amongst them. He forced himself into a smile, greeting everyone, but his heart was deeply troubled: When he received the order to withdraw from the Village of Blue, the villagers were so sad to see him leave they escorted him for several miles in tears. Who would have thought, the next time they met would be on a field of battle, and on opposite sides.

All the Beastmen warmly greeted ZiChuan Xiu back. ZiChuan Xiu had helped most of them in the past, even some of the younger ones who had never seen ZiChuan Xiu before had heard of his stories. Some even timidly called out his name using the unfamiliar human language: “Uncle<sup>[1]</sup> Xiu, the Lightbringer.”

Being reunited again after so many years, they all had so many words to share and so many stories to tell. Normally such occasion would have been quite the emotional one, but not if Luo Jie had anything to say about it: “Sir, when you are done reminiscing the past, can you please help me down from the trees?” Meanwhile, a bunch Beastmen hung Luo Jie upside down from a tree and beat the living shit out of him, leaving him an inch from death.”

When ZiChuan Xiu, Dren, and the others made their way back to the camp, the band of criminals from Xiu’s Company were still busy drafting the condolence letter: “It is with immense grief, that we mourn our most esteemed Officer, the brave warrior and loyal guardian of House ZiChuan, Deputy Commander ZiChuan Xiu! He personally led the brave charge against the hateful rebels in the battle of October 8th, and ultimately died a heroic death!”

“His final words were: ‘Brothers, everything I own is now yours!’ We shall carry on his banner in fond remembrance and continue to fight with honour! May Sir Xiu’s spirit forever encourage us to push forth! He will always live on in our hearts...”

That was where the condolence letter stopped, because ZiChuan Xiu had decided to show the idiot writing the letter what “immense grief” really meant. After he was done with him, he handed him over to the already aggravated Luo Jie who was still hurting everywhere from the beating he took earlier, saying: “He is all yours now, just don’t kill him!”

Luo Jie quickly took the hint and dragged the soldier away.

Dren shook his head: “A guy like that and you are keeping him alive? If he was one of us, the law of ‘Sai’ depicted that anyone running away before a battle was to be hanged.” The Beastmen called themselves the ‘People of Sai’.

ZiChuan Xiu laughed bitterly: “Heads are not cabbages; they won’t grow back if I cut them off. Besides... am I supposed to order the half of my men to hang the other half?”

Dren laughed heartily, splitting his huge mouth in half: “This is the first time I’ve seen an Army like yours! Only if every House ZiChuan’s Army was like that! And we would have crushed Stirling’s forces with less than a hundred of us!”

ZiChuan Xiu asked curiously: “You fought against Stirling’s forces? How did that go?”

All the Beastmen shook their head at the same time: “Terrifying!” The words brought fear to each of their faces: “He is not a man; he is the God of War reincarnate!” The younger Beastmen rushed to tell the stories they heard about Stirling: “Stirling is like two pine trees tall! His eyes are brighter than pure gold and he spits fire at night! He can make replicates of himself, capable of appearing in several different places separated by thousands of miles at the same time! His body is impervious to harm; his roar can blast an entire battalion of men away! He even knows Dark Magic. Every night he would play his flute and every House ZiChuan’s Soldier who died that day would rise up from their grave and rejoin their ranks, becoming even stronger than before!”

Stirling’s stories kept them going for tens of minutes, another Beastman even began singing a Song written in his name. “Anyways...” Dren’s final conclusion was: “How are you supposed to win against the God of war?!” What he meant was: It is not that we are not brave enough, but if our opponent is a God, then we are not the ones to blame for our losses!

“That is right, how could we have won?” A bunch Beastmen repeated the words piteously. Bai Chuan couldn’t help laughing: “If that is the case, why don’t you guys just surrender to Stirling instead, what is the point of staying at the rebellion?”

“Well, if we could really join Stirling, that wouldn’t be so bad!”

“Hehe, but the elders gave words, if any people of Sai dares to side with Stirling, the punishment is death!”

“I hear Stirling is a great man. He doesn’t burn down Sai’s villages.”

ZiChuan Xiu ignored the youngsters arguing about Stirling, and asked Dren: “So what are you planning to do now? Keep fighting for the rebellion? House ZiChuan would only keep sending more reinforcements to the Far East.”

Dren thought about it, then said: “We don’t want to fight anymore. We can’t beat Stirling. We just want to go home. It is been so long since we left. I wonder how my wife and children are faring, and if my village still stands.

He told ZiChuan Xiu that the Beastmen from the Village of Blue had wanted to go home for a while now, but House ZiChuan’s forces had blockades set up along the road leading back home. Especially near the province of Deja, Lacoss and Yun, the bulk of House ZiChuan’s Army had gathered there, numbering several hundreds of thousand strong. No matter which way they took, west, east, north or south, all the roads had been cut off and more ZiChuan’s reinforcement were arriving every day. A small group like theirs with only a few dozen Beastmen would be spotted and destroyed instantly if they ventured too far from the woods.

ZiChuan Xiu clapped his hands and said: “That is easy! I can take you home!”

The Beastmen cheered; Dren pulled ZiChuan Xiu again into his arms, hugging him tightly. Bai Chuan quickly averted her gazes, unwilling to see the sight of ZiChuan Xiu’s flushed cheeks from being hugged too tightly.

After the celebration, ZiChuan Xiu suddenly remembered something: “But... I can’t do that right now. My orders are to pacify the whole region...”

Dren confidently clapped his chest: “Xiu the Lightbringer, you are a true friend of Sai! No questions asked; I will help you! People of Sai are always family, no matter where we are! I know most of the tribes around this place and I know the mountains like the back of my hand!”

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The next day, Xiu’s Company once again began their pacification work. Dren didn’t lie, he knew most of the Beastmen in the area, and many of them were



even distant relatives of his.

Dren first went to see his cousin, Drake. He was the Chief of the village next to Village of Blue. Seeing several thousand soldiers marching his way, and his cousin's promise saying that they would be able to go home, he readily surrendered with his men without a second thought.

Drake then found his cousin, Deb, and he surrendered as well. Together they found another one of their cousins, Delin... Their family tree was so convoluted, it made Bai Chuan dizzy... The first day alone, Xiu's Company took in over a thousand Rebels. ZiChuan Xiu treated every one of them with the same kindness, eat first, questions later.

Ever since the Rebels were defeated by Stirling, they had been hiding deep within the mountains and forests, scared of being caught. They hadn't had anything decent to eat for weeks. Now finally holding a bowl of warm meal in their hands, they were about to burst into tears.

Most of the Rebels were close to starving. In some places, some of the more stubborn ones refused to surrender. ZiChuan Xiu simply gave the order to prepare a big pot of meat stew. When the wind carried the irresistible scent into the trees, the Rebels instantly crawled out of their hiding places shouting: "Wasili! (We surrender!)"

Every day, large group of Rebels would march day and night from other provinces all the way to surrender themselves to Xiu the Lightbringer. Apparently, the rumours had spread quickly, and many of them wanted to go home. By the time the week ended, ZiChuan Xiu couldn't even believe his own eyes when he saw his "military records": Total of recruited enemies – over seventy thousand, almost ten times of his original number.

Bai Chuan found the situation very troubling. Facing such large amount of Rebels, if they were to turn on them, they could wipe out Xiu's Company within the hour.

She made up her mind and decided that it was her duty to warn that "little idiot" at least once.

Bai Chuan: "Sir, do you want to hear a joke?"

ZiChuan Xiu was surprised: “Really? I never knew you were capable of telling a joke! It better be funny!”

Bai Chuan ignored him, saying: “In the midst of a battle, a soldier from the Far Eastern Army yelled: ‘Sir, I caught a Demon!’ The officer replied: ‘Good work! Bring him to me.’ The soldiers answered: ‘I can’t, he is about to drag me away!’”

ZiChuan Xiu stared dumbfounded: “Then what?”

Bai Chuan was furious, how could someone be this stupid? She patiently hinted: “Sir, after hearing that joke, does it remind you of anything? Don’t you think our current situation is very similar to that of the soldier?”

ZiChuan Xiu rubbed his head and thought about it for a while, then answered: “Nope. Not really.” And left.

Leaving Bai Chuan alone cursing behind him: “Idiot! Damn idiot! Stupid idiot! Fucking idiot!”

Chang Chuan, who was in charge of the logistics, came up with another question as he reported to ZiChuan Xiu: “Sir, there are too many mouths to feed. Our food supply will only last for another week!”

ZiChuan Xiu considered for a moment, then gave the order: “Summon all the Officers of the rank Captain and above. We shall hold Xiu’s Company’s first Council of War.”

# Purple River - Chapter 7.3

## Sidestory - Get Rich

Based on House ZiChuan's regular army manning quota: Ten men form a squad, fifty men form a platoon and five hundred men form a battalion. A Cavalry division had ten battalions, total five thousand strong, while an Infantry division had twenty battalions, total ten thousand strong.

"Xiu's Company" only had a bit over eight thousand Cavalries, which were barely enough to fill the ranks of two Cavalry divisions, but Luo Jie, Chang Chuan, Bai Chuan all complained, saying they were Banner Masters. Given their rank, they should at least command a whole division each.

ZiChuan Xiu had no choice, so he reformed the Xiu's Company into three divisions: Three thousand men in the first, under the command of Luo Jie. Three thousand men in the second, under the command of Chang Chuan; Finally, Bai Chuan was given the command of the third division, which answered directly to ZiChuan Xiu.

Everyone was happy with the outcome, but ZiChuan Xiu suddenly realized, that after all this time, he still only had three Officers under his command. Nothing had changed.

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During Xiu's Company's first Council of War, ZiChuan Xiu's words had left everyone flabbergasted.

Bai Chuan's jaw dropped in surprise: "Sir, what did you just say? What... what... was that?"

ZiChuan Xiu answered understandingly: "Well. I said we are going to set up Xiu's Limited Company by Shares.

Luo Jie: "Sir, but what is.... that erm, Shares?"

Chang Chuan: "Shares? Luo Jie, you idiot! Sir Xiu was clearly talking about Beers! Wait, why are we limited by beers? I still don't understand, Sir!"

"So called Limited Company by Shares, is a way to organize the capital for modern enterprises, where the company's assets are divided into equal shares. In such companies, the liability for the company's debt is limited by the total assets of the company, and the shareholders shares that limited liability for the debt based on the amount of shares they are holding. The profits distribution is determined based on the number of shares, after the deduction of the mandatory statutory reserve and the public welfare fund. So for each share you hold, you get one share of the profit... Get it?"

The trio spoke in unison: "Not at all!"

ZiChuan Xiu sighed: "Fine, I will make it very simple for you. It is basically a scam! First you come up with a catchy name, (like Xiu's International Unlimited Investment Group Co.) think of an attractive project, (like we found a hidden treasure trove in the Far East, all we need is the money to begin the excavation) make some false promises to lure them in, (like if you pay me one now I pay you ten back in a year) and finally you declare bankruptcy. (Start running the moment you get the money) That... my friends, is called a Limited Company by Shares!"

It was as if everyone suddenly had an epiphany: "What didn't just you say so from the start? Isn't that what you have been doing all along?"

Only Chang Chuan was still not convinced: "Sir, we are in the middle of a war-zone, where are we supposed to find idiots with money? All we have here are refugees. Even if we strip them bare we won't find a single coin on them."

ZiChuan Xiu smiled nefariously: "Worry not. I have found them already! Did you not notice the large group of caravans following us? Food is the least of our worries!"

Whenever Xiu's Company arrived to a new town, ZiChuan Xiu would make it his priority to get in touch with the local merchant guilds, and preach his truth to them: The Civil War in the Far East is a great opportunity for all of us to get rich! Just think about it, the Civil War has been going on for months. Most of the supply of salt, food, medicine and daily necessities all come from the core areas

of House ZiChuan. The demands must be going through the roof by now. At the same time, the Far East produces large amount of gold, diamonds, magical crystals and gems. Due to the Civil War, all the trades have stopped completely, leaving large amount of shinies piling up in the storage... Now consider this, what if you are the first group of merchants to start the trade again in the Far East. How profitable would that be...?

The merchants were practically salivating at the potential prospect, but they quickly regained their wits: The Far East is in a war-zone. Forget about the Rebel-controlled provinces, even in House ZiChuan-controlled provinces, bandits and thieves are everywhere. Without a large armed escort providing them protection to cross the borders, what chance do they have?

ZiChuan Xiu laughed candidly: "You are in luck. I, Sir ZiChuan Xiu, am the Commander of House ZiChuan's finest, the Xiu's Company! With three divisions of elite Cavalries at my disposal, they are more than enough to secure your cargo's safety! (He of course didn't mention how many men he had in each division!)

The merchants asked: Xiu's Company? Never heard of them. Who are they? I hope they are not one of those newly recruited militia army. They are worthless... ZiChuan Xiu denied angrily: Of course not! Xiu's Company has a long and glorious history. They are disciplined, loyal and very capable, and as I said, they are one of House ZiChuan's finest! Anyways, it is ok if you haven't heard of it, but you should have at least heard of Sir Stirling's "Central Army Death Guards" and Sir Di Lin's "Iron Constables", right?

The merchants looked at each other and nodded in agreement: Sir Stirling and Sir Di Lin were both famous generals of our generation. We've obviously heard of their names and even know their stories! But Sir ZiChuan Xiu... who are you...?

That was the signal for ZiChuan Xiu to pull out the portrait showing him, Stirling and Di Lin all posing together, the one with their signatures on the back: Everyone look! If you are not blind, you should be able to tell who they are right? They say a man is defined by whom he call his friends! Naturally, the one in the same portrait of two famous generals has to be a famous general as well! You all know their character, integrity and work ethics. Putting your faith and your wealth in the hands of a famous general of the same calibre with Sir Stirling and

Sir Di Lin... What do you have to worry about?

With that little trick, ZiChuan Xiu exploited the greedy hearts of countless merchants along the way and made them willingly invest in his little venture. Some even came along themselves in caravans full of cargos. (Naturally, they needed to pay extra for protection.) ZiChuan Xiu thought, It was time to let the merchants in on some of the details, or in other words, let them have a taste of the potential profit...

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Amid the sound of fireworks, the proposal was passed unanimously by Xiu's Company's first Council of War, and thus, Xiu's International Unlimited Investment Group Co. was officially launched!

The Company's new articles of association declared: "All Xiu's Company's soldiers, automatically receives a share of the company. Squad leader gets two, Platoon leader gets five and Battalion leaders gets ten. The profit will be distributed at month's end based on the equity and the numbers of the shares.

ZiChuan Xiu told the merchants: "To conquer the vast markets of the Far Eastern Region, to overcome the criteria of its various market segments, and to adapt to the complex shifting market conditions, we must adapt ourselves to the market oriented economy, reducing our exposure to risk, increasing our profitability, encouraging scientific and technological innovations, and optimizing our industrial and asset structure. Industrialization, Globalization and Diversification, those are the keys to our success!"

The merchant were amazed by Sir ZiChuan Xiu's business acumen as they praised him for his wisdom, foresight, vision and being a pioneer in market development.

Luo Jie was totally confused, he hurriedly asked ZiChuan Xiu: "Sir, what did you just tell them?"

ZiChuan Xiu replied: "It basically meant that one scam isn't enough, we need to lay down more traps! Besides, those fireworks were crazy expensive, all that for only one company seems such a waste!"

And so, on the very same day, they hurriedly founded Luo Jie's Cereal Ltd., Bai

Chuan's Cosmetics Ltd., Chang Chuan's Diamond Acquisition Ltd., Luo Jie's Textile Ltd., Chang Chuan's Investment Banking, Bai Chuan's Technology Consulting Firm, Bai Chuan's Import and Export Trade Ltd., Chang Chuan's Finance Ltd., Luo Jie's Trust Fund Ltd... A total of fifty-six companies!

There were so many billboards for all the companies, they had covered every door and wall in Xiu's Company's base camp. In the end they ran out of space, they had to put the billboard of "Luo Jie's Far Eastern Seafood Ltd" over at the male bathroom, and "Bai Chuan's Perfume Ltd" over at the female bathroom.

Luo Jie became the General Manager, Legal Representative, Chairman and the Executive Officer of twenty-one companies... Chang Chuan took charge of nineteen companies and Bai Chuan had sixteen companies under her name. Everyone referred each other as Chairman that day, looking incredibly happy.

Even though ZiChuan Xiu didn't took any position in any of the companies, he had shares in every one of them, varying from hundred percent to fifty one percent.

The Beastmen grew envious of the situation. They quickly sent Dren to negotiate, demanding to have a company or two of their own. ZiChuan Xiu immediately satisfied them, launching "Alibaba and Forty Thieves" Ltd., and "Sai's Angels" Ltd. on the spot. He even gave them the exclusive dealership agreement of Xiu's Company Ltd. in their home town, the province of Wargo... Naturally, the same rules applied, ZiChuan Xiu held seventy percent of the company shares, leaving thirty percent for the Beastmen!

All of a sudden the Beastmen were satisfied as they left in smiles holding a few billboards of their own. Now they really had something to brag about! In the history of their entire village, they had never seen things like that, being a Chairman was like having your name on the ancestral halls... Even though they never quite understood what Ltd. stood for and what being a Chairman entailed...

All they cared about was, how jealous the idiots from the nearby villages would be when they show them the billboards!

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"Sir, can you repeat once more what you just said?"

“Sure, it is pretty simple. Bai Chuan. The inter-relationships of our companies are as followed: Both Luo Jie’s Textile Ltd. and Bai Chuan’s Dress Ltd. hold forty-seven percent and thirty-eight percent of the shares from Luo Jie’s Trade Ltd. respectively. And through equity financing, Luo Jie’s Textile has absorbed ten thousand shares from Luo Jie’s Far Eastern Food Ltd. Meanwhile, Chang Chuan’s Investment Banking Ltd. has acquired the majority shares of both of those companies through stock swap. However, Luo Jie’s Trust Fund Ltd. is only a shell company. Its only purpose is to deal with the taxes. It is mostly financed by Luo Jie’s Trade Ltd. but all the taxes are paid through Chang Chuan’s Investment Banking Ltd... So, that sounds simple right? I’m sure you get it now!”

Bai Chuan was feeling light-headed. She finally realized one thing: Even if she had another ten thousand years to live, she wouldn’t be able to understand.

Chang Chuan came in to the room flustered: “Sir, this is bad! Both of my companies have been absorbed!”

“What happened?”

Chang Chuan took a deep breath: “So, let me explain. I was just outside, and out of nowhere, came a hungry wild boar, it swallowed my bag with all the documents...”

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October 20th, Xiu’s Company began moving deeper into the Far Eastern Region.

Their movement quickly alerted the House ZiChuan’s sentries along the road, sending a series of urgent report as warning.

“Huge numbers of Rebels are moving towards the province of Deja!”

“We spotted large amount of Rebels gathering near the province of Yun!” An array of signal fires was lit along the road.

When the local garrisons fidgeted to respond to the sudden threat, all they saw was the Commander of Xiu’s Company, ZiChuan Xiu’s cocky expression: “Welcome, brothers! I’m the Commander of Xiu’s Company, ZiChuan Xiu, and these are my prisoners!”



Everyone stared in disbelief, watching the mighty Rebel host marching past them. They weren't even disarmed!

ZiChuan Xiu swiftly took the opportunity: "How long have you guys been out here? Do you miss the food from back home? When was the last time you tasted wine? Still eating those unpalatable dried bread? How is life been treating you in the Far East? What do you do for fun? ...Welcome to Xiu's Company!"

Life had always been rough for a soldier on an expedition, even more so when you were in a place with nothing to buy. Xiu's Company brought them wonderful food and drinks from home, new clothing, shoes and many other daily necessities... Well, the price might have been a little steep, but if anyone, the soldiers had always been paid well, and here in the no-man's-land, their only worry was having no way to spend them.

The news spread like wildfire, soon every armed force in the Far East knew: Xiu's Company had the best food, tastiest wine, latest clothing and even stuff no one ever seen before... Suddenly, visitors flooded towards them from everywhere in the Region, especially on the pay day.

Of course, there were demands Xiu's Company couldn't meet as well. Like last time, when a few officers dragged ZiChuan Xiu to the side without anyone noticing: "Hey, are there... you know... I mean... working girls..."

ZiChuan Xiu responded regretfully: "I'm sorry. Our company is currently not in this line of business." Seeing the disappointed look on the officers, he added sympathetically: "However, I'm sure we can still be of service..." He then sold a collection of his adult magazine for an astronomical price.

But only taking soldiers' and officers' money was not enough to satisfy ZiChuan Xiu. He even sent out groups of his rebel prisoners to the nearby villages to promote his business: "Xiu's Company shall hold a commodity exhibition over the course of October 25th and 26th!"

As he expected, the news took the provinces by storm. Thousands of Beastmen, Serpents, Goblins, and Dwarves brought large amount of diamonds, gold dusts and gems to exchange for salt, medicine, food, textile and other necessities. The business was booming.

After the rebels had chased away the original owners of the mines, all the

newly extracted precious metal suddenly had no way to be sold. Hence it wasn't too surprising to see many of the miners bringing large baskets of precious gems to the fair in exchange for all kinds of daily necessities.

The merchants couldn't be happier. Their overstocked goods were sold out in record time. ZiChuan Xiu even had plans to send Chang Chuan's division back with the merchants to bring in more goods, while marching east to expand his business even further.

Xiu's Company swept through the Far East like a storm, from west to east, stripping everything bare everywhere they went, enemies and friendlies alike.

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Eventually the news reached the ears of the highest ranking officer in the Far Eastern Region, Commander Ming Hui. Apparently one of his officers had filed an angry complaint after losing three months of his salaries from a night at "Chang Chuan's Happy World".

Ming Hui was furious. He immediately wrote a letter to ZiChuan Xiu, reprimanding him for his actions: The situation in the Far East is most dire. As a servant of House ZiChuan, it is our duty to form a united front in response to the calamity ahead of us. While countless soldiers are risking their lives at the frontline for the survival of House ZiChuan, you, ZiChuan Xiu, who was graced by two Headmasters, only know to think of your own personal gain in a time of crisis and at the expense of House ZiChuan's future, taking advantage of your own allies and selling strategic resources to our enemies! If you... you do not repent now, then prepare yourself for court martial!" There were even a few ink stains at the end of the letter, clearly showing how infuriated Sir Ming Hui was when he wrote it.

ZiChuan Xiu's reply was simple: "you can have four percent of the shares."

Ming Hui's reply was even angrier than before: "ZiChuan Xiu, you are beyond help at this point! You have wasted everything I've ever taught you! Even now you do not see the error in your ways. How dare you try to bribe me with merely four percent of the shares? I'm the highest ranking Officer in the Far East, a member of the High Command. Your action is a direct attack on my integrity!"

ZiChuan Xiu wrote back: "Five percent; take it or leave it."

Ming Hui replied: “Deal.”

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Xiu’s Company’s business grew rapidly as they marched deeper in to the Far Eastern Regions, setting up branch offices everywhere they went. Amongst all the armed forces active in the Far East, only Xiu’s Company was envied by all.

When everyone else chewed on dried bread and drank muddied water, Xiu’s Company ate the best pork and drank the most expensive wine, and when all the other soldiers walked around in torn up uniforms, only Xiu’s Company’s clothing were still brand new.

The reason was simple, because Xiu’s Company always had several thousand caravans full of cargo following closely behind. (Attracted by the massive profit, more and more merchants had joined their ranks.) Furthermore, at the end of every month, Xiu’s Company would distribute their monthly profit, lining up soldiers’ pocket. Everyone practically worshipped ZiChuan Xiu like a god.

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Of course, there were bad days as well.

Just the other day, when they passed through the province of Lunang, a group of Serpents robbed the caravans carrying “Luo Jie’s Trade Ltd’s” cargos, causing the enraged ZiChuan Xiu to leave a huge red mark on the “Operating Expenses” part in the ledger while giving Luo Jie absolute hell for his incompetence.

Feeling aggrieved, Luo Jie summoned his men and told them: “No profit this month!”

The few unthinkable words made every soldier from Luo Jie’s division howl like lost wolves. Under Luo Jie’s command, they pursued the Serpent Bandits for thousands of miles, deep into the Rebel-controlled territories, showing complete fearlessness. A fierce battle later, hundreds of Serpents were cut to pieces and the missing cargo was successfully retrieved.

The Bandits had finally learned the meaning of “desperation”, but that was not the end... Xiu’s Company’s other shareholder, Commander Ming Hui was outraged by the sudden cutback in the profit sharing, and sent a large group of infantry in retaliation, burning down their entire nests. Unfortunately for the few

lucky survivors, who barely made it out alive from their last encounter, soon ran into another group of angry javelin-wielding Beastmen, claiming to be “Sai’s Angel Ltd’s” managers. With nothing left to take, the Beastmen skinned them alive.

The words soon reached every corners of the Far Eastern Region. In only matter of days, every bandit or rebel group knew the phrase: “Whatever you do, do not cross Xiu’s Company!”

Watching large amount of shiny silver, glistening gold and brilliant diamonds flowing into his coffers, ZiChuan Xiu was ecstatic, and like always, he stuffed them all under his bed. There was nothing more enjoyable than to sleep on a mou

# Purple River - Chapter 7.4

## Banquet

October 5th, Stirling's Central Army had left the province of Yun and into the province of Deja.

Most of Deja's and Iriya's local population were Humans. When the storm of Rebellion was sweeping through the Far East, the provincial Governor, Gu Lan showed his commanding talents and his poise. Together with the newly drafted militias, he managed to raise a large provincial defence force of close to a hundred thousand men. In conjunction with the garrison force of the nearby province of Iriya, they formed a united defence front. Even though their army was not big enough to suppress the rebellion, it was more than enough to hold their ground. As a result, those two provinces were the only regions left in the entire Far East untouched by the flame of war, and the only place where Humans thrived.

Ever since they crawled out of the swamp of Yun, Stirling had never felt so relieved. He had returned to the fast-paced world of men, a place far away from the fighting, the clashing of steel and the desperate struggle for survival. Seeing the quiet and peaceful villages again, the bustling and rowdy streets of the city, the clamorous tavern and brothels, the busy market filled with merchants trying to promote their wares... everything of the world in front of him seemed so strangely unfamiliar in his eyes. Only then did the memories of blood and steel slowly begin to fade into the back of his mind.

As one of the highest ranking officers, the Commander of the Central Army, he was constantly accompanied by a large escort of local officials, trying their hardest to please him. Fireworks, flowers and wines, thousands of crowd gathered on the day of his arrival. Everyone wanted to catch a glimpse of the mightiest of ZiChuan's army. No matter where he went, the local nobles, gentries and officials would hold banquet in his honour, for he was the Central Army

Commander, the most famous and accomplished general of House ZiChuan who had Headmaster's favour, and the heavy weight of ZiChuan's ruling echelon with many promising prospects. They all sounded so eager, all claimed to be his best friend when they asked: "Sir, you have to grace us with your presence!"

Stirling being a good-mannered gentleman, he didn't want to offend anyone, therefore he often let himself get dragged away like a child.

Sadly, his stomach was too used to the barely cooked gruel-like meals in the battlefield. Suddenly changing his diet to wild delicacies, rare seafood and expensive wines, he could not make the adjustment. Consequently, he spent most of his day running between the outhouses.

And he wasn't the only one, every Central Army Officer, from Deputy Commander, Staff Officer down to every division captain, everyone was soundly defeated by the banquet table.

Even for a group of Officers born in the capital, the luxurious lifestyle of the Far Eastern Nobles was truly something else.

Only after Stirling had reached the provincial capital of Deja, the City of Deja, did Stirling start to feel better, but before he got the chance to fully recover, another deadly invitation had already arrived: "Provincial Governor of Deja - Gu Lan, Administrator - Liu Zi Feng, Provincial Governor of Iriya - Eeling, Administrator Luo Lin Shuang, and other relevant officials and local nobles wish to hold a banquet tonight to welcome Central Army Commander - Stirling and his officers, to our corner of the Far East."

Stirling really didn't have the patience to deal with those sketchy officials anymore; He turned to Staff Officer, Tang Ping: "Can we skip that?" Tang Ping shook his head: "Sir, even though they are only ranked Red Banner Masters, all our current supplies still have to rely on the province of Deja and Iriya. And Deja's Provincial Governor, Gu Lan comes from a powerful family in the region. Amongst all the Governors and Administrators of the twenty-three provinces in the Far East, their family alone holds the positions of nine. In addition, both Gu Lan and Luo Lin Shuang are members of the Council of Elders. Even when Commander Ge Ying Xing was still alive, he had to pay them respect. We have no choice but to do the same."

Stirling smiled bitterly: "I understand. Another one of those we cannot afford to offend. All right, tell everyone to get ready."

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A long line of local officials and nobles had been waiting for them outside, curtsying everywhere they go. Feeling slightly uneasy, Stirling wanted to object, but before he could, sound of fireworks already exploded over the small distance. A group of smiling faces quickly surrounded them like flies to manure, extending their greetings: "Sir, you must have been weary from the journey!", "I wish you ever victorious, and your fame forever growing", "Sir, on behalf of the people of the Far East, we are eternally grateful for everything you have done!", "Sir Stirling is still so young and have accomplished so much. I'm sure you'll have a bright and promising future ahead of you."

While Stirling was busy responding to the overwhelming crowd, an officer dressed in military uniform stepped forward: "Greetings, I'm Gu Lan."

Stirling hurriedly greeted back: "Greetings, Governor Gu Lan." He carefully considered the middle-aged man standing in front of him, slightly obese and bloated body, a pair of plump and well-cared-for cheeks faintly showing the underlying spots of white from excessive alcohol consumption, a typical pink red nose of a drunkard, and a pair of glazed and bloodshot eyes."

Stirling's first impression of the man was that of a useless drunk or a spoiled rich kid, which surprised him greatly: The rumors had it that Governor Gu Lan displayed incredible calm and resolve during a time of crisis. Could he really be a drunkard? Or perhaps, he shouldn't judge a person by their appearance too quickly.

As the host of the evening, Gu Lan introduced Stirling to all the other guests of the evening: Administrator of Deja – Liu Zi Feng, a wrinkled old man.

The moment Stirling saw him, his face reminded Stirling of the dried meat they had left from the military reserve. He was much older than Gu Lan, yet for some puzzling reason he kept following Gu Lan's lead in almost anything of importance, constantly curtsying and throwing glances seeking Gu Lan's approval.

By regulation, a provincial Governor and Administrator were given the same

rank, the only difference between the two was that: one was in charge of the military affairs while the other dealt with the civil affairs.

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Next up, Administrator of Iriya – Luo Lin Shuang, a pale faced young man.

Stirling gave him a friendly greeting: “How are you, Sir Luo?”

Luo Lin Shuang hastily boasted: “Sir Stirling, perhaps you haven't heard, but in term of seniority, Sir Luo Ming Hai is a distance uncle of mine!” Stirling reconsidered the arrogant young aristocrat in front of him, sighing: “Distant cousin of Sir Luo Ming Hai, how are you?”

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Amongst all the guests, the only one Stirling took a liking to, was the Governor of Iriya – Eeling.

A middle-aged man, bulky frame, imposing appearance, direct and decisive, polite and measured mannerism, compared to the forced servile attitude from the other officials, he was a significant improvement: “He at least looks like a soldier, just that constant smirk of his, is giving the man a mean look.”

Out of all the Red Banner Master ranked officials attending the banquet, there were a few Governors and Administrators from the already fallen provinces present as well. Their own prefecture was long overrun by the rebels. They came here seeking refuge.

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A moment of bowing, saluting, greeting, shaking hands, patting the shoulder and curtsying later, everyone finally took their seats. Gu Lan announced loudly: “Today, we are here to welcome Sir Stirling and the Central Army Officer’s arrival. Everyone please feel free to speak your mind!”

Throughout the extravagant feast, Stirling acted humble and honest, amiable and easygoing. He attentively conversed with every guest, cheering with them. His eloquent and graceful mannerism quickly earned him everyone’s admiration.

There were several mentions of the rebellion during the feast, and each time the guests took turn to express their deep hatred for the cunning, treacherous



and barbaric Rebels.

Governor Lu Hai who fled here from a province near the border explained angrily, telling how he used to have seven Beastmen divisions and three Serpent divisions, almost forty thousand men under his command. When the rebellion began, all of his troops mutinied. He had lost the battle before the fight even began, or else he would have been able to do something about the rebellion instead of running away in such embarrassing fashion.

Everyone comforted him saying: "That is right; those lowly rebels are all bunch of shameless, dishonest turncoats!"

Sitting on the right side of Stirling, Governor Eeling tilted the corner of his mouth into a half smile. Stirling thought there had to be more to the story, asking in a whisper: "Why? You disagree?"

Eeling was caught by surprise, hastily denying: "No, of course not. My apologies."

Stirling smiled, but his words were sharper than razor: "In other words, Sir Eeling does not wish to share it with me?"

Eeling's couldn't hide it any longer, he whispered closer to Stirling's ears: "When Lu Hai first came to us, his wives and mistresses alone could form a whole platoon. Amongst his luggage, there were several carts filled with gold."

Stirling frowned, whispering back: "Where does a Garrison Commander get so much money from?"

Eeling whispered softly: "Officially, he was supposed to man a defence force of fifty thousand, however in reality, he could barely field a force of twenty thousand. The salaries of the left over thirtyish thousand men all ended up in his pocket! Furthermore, he only ever paid one third of what he owed to the twenty thousand Garrison forces he had. It would be a miracle if his men didn't mutiny!"

Stirling was shocked: "He embezzled the funds and took the blood money from the soldiers?"

Eeling nodded; Stirling's expression instantly darkened. Both of them no longer spoke about the matter.

Another old nobleman cried, saying he couldn't understand how the rebels could be so ungrateful and join the rebellion, even though he had always treated other races well, "taking care of them in every possible way."

Eeling smiled coldly as he told Stirling: "Every possible way indeed! In his territory, the Beastmen had to pay tax even if they wanted to brush their teeth."

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There were a few other nobles talking about the exceptional cruelty shown by the non-human races in their home town, killing any human they saw. Everyone agreed wholeheartedly, saying how ungrateful they were despite what House ZiChuan did for them. Instead of repaying us with their gratitude, they turned their weapon against us, killing humans, especially human nobles, the symbol of authority! And how they should have wiped out every non-human race instead!

One of them turned to Stirling: "Normally I wouldn't say bad thing about the deceased, but it really was Commander Ge Ying Xing's fault. He had always been too lenient towards those lowly savages, taking their side against ours - the ones of noble birth. If he had ruled with a firmer hand, perhaps everything that happened today could have been avoided. Hereby I have to praise Sir Stirling again for crushing the Rebels the way he did, decisive and ruthless, unlike that timidly and cowardly Ge Ying Xing!"

Everyone quickly shifted their gaze towards Stirling after the noble had finished. Seeing Stirling's cold and unappreciative expression, everyone knew the flattery had missed its mark and no one laughed.

The flatterer forced a few dry laughter, then buried his head into the plate before him and remained silent.

Stirling whispered: "Who was he?"

Eeling described him in the same casual manner: "Administrator of Lange, Tang Guo." He continued in another whisper: "He was very motivated when he exploited the Serpents and extorted the Beastmen in his territory, but when the Rebellion began, the first thing he did was ordering every officers in his province to stand fast and defend their ground, all the while fleeing to safety himself. The big bearded fellow laughing next to him is the Governor of Garin. When the Rebellion first began, the Rebel Army was still relatively small. Seeing the nearby

provincial capital of Minske being besieged by the rebels, he and his thirty thousand garrison troops didn't lift a finger, even though Garin was right next to Minske. His excuses were: "We have to protect Garin at all cost; we cannot abandon our post!" As a result, the Governor of Minske, Lin Wei died heroically in battle. Greatly emboldened by the victory, the Rebel Army turned their spears towards Garin. And there you have it, the supposedly "We cannot abandon our post" brave Governor, fled the city during dark, leaving the soldiers and the citizens to fend for themselves. His army didn't put up much of a fight afterwards. The rebels got in and killed tens of thousands civilians, leaving a sea of corpse in their wake..."

"Enough!" Stirling harshly interrupted Eeling's words. Watching the group of graceful, classy and charming men who were supposed to be the backbone of ZiChuan sitting in front of him, he was disgusted beyond words.

The whispers, laughter and discussions instantly quieted down. No one knew why Sir Stirling was suddenly so angry; everyone kept their mouth shut in fear. Countless infuriated eyes all fixated on Eeling sitting next to Stirling, hinting: You bloody idiot, what have you done this time, to make Sir Stirling so angry?

Noticing the sudden uncomfortable silence, Stirling realized he had lost his cool. He forced himself into a smile as he tried the fancy dish in front of him, saying: "The meat is a bit salty!"

The atmosphere on the table instantly became lively again as everyone firmly stood behind Stirling's assessment. "Indeed, the meat is way too salty!" Saying each one with a serious face, as if they were just given an important task by Stirling, some even began listing several possibilities as to why the meat was so salty!

As the host of the evening, Gu Lan had seen it all happen. It was clearly Eeling's fault. Whatever he said in whispers had angered Stirling greatly. Initially, he was a little bit jealous of Eeling today, being able to sit right next to Stirling and getting along with him so well, but now he was feeling much better: Well done! Eeling you cynical idiot, looks like your flattery has missed its mark as well!

Gu Lan decided to strike while the iron is hot, pushing closer: "Sir, I'm terribly sorry for the overly-salty meat, I will punish those stupid cooks accordingly later.

Sir, would you like to try one of our local specialties? It is delicious; I guarantee it. I will have the cooks prepare it now.”

Stirling didn’t know if he should cry or laugh; he never expected his careless words would cause so much trouble.

Seeing two servants carrying a pot of whitish, tofu-like substance, Eeling gasped: “No way!” He turned towards Gu Lan, smiling coldly: “You sure spared no expenses!”

Gu Lan restrained himself: “It is nothing special. I’m sure someone like Sir Stirling has been to places and seen things we couldn’t even dream of. In a remote place like the Far East, we don’t have many things of value. This is just something insignificant we have prepared to show our gratitude.”

The words piqued Stirling’s interest, he asked: “So, is this very expensive? I wouldn’t want to impose!”

Eeling and Gu Lan answered at the same time: “Not expensive at all.”

Eeling murmured quietly: “The ingredients are in fact very easy to find.”

Gu Lan cracked a huge smile: “We don’t have anything valuable to offer in a desolate place like the Far East. This is but a local delicacy, please try it.”

Given the situation, Stirling had to be the first to try, or no one else would. He smiled softly: “Very well, if you insist.” He fetched a spoonful and savoured it. Indeed, it was delicious. Smooth texture, not too greasy, it was a true delicacy.

The Central Army officers followed suit and all shouted praises. Yet, no one could tell what it was made of, except that it was very tasty.

Gu Lan spoke with enthusiasm: “It is all right. Sir, if you like how it tastes, for the rest of your stay here in Deja, I will have a pot prepared for you every day!”

Stirling hurriedly declined: “You are too kind, but that would be too much trouble.” However, Stirling asked out of curiosity: “But what is it made of? It looks like tofu, but it is much smoother; it taste like eggs, but more delicate... I simply cannot tell.”

“Nothing special really. It only took about a dozen Beastmen’s brain to make a pot. Am I right? Sir Gu Lan?” Eeling spoke nonchalantly. Knowing all too well

what kind of man Stirling was, he simply let Gu Lan to dig a deeper grave for himself.

Gu Lan smiled: “Only Beastmen’s brain is not enough to produce such delicacy. I even had them add some of Serpent and Goblin’s brain juice... Sir, you don’t have to so modest. I can have them prepared for you daily. Or perhaps, I can teach you the recipe? The ingredients are all very easy to find. I have many slaves and even more prisoners. The key lies at the preparation. It has to be fresh. You have to keep them alive when you crack open their skull. I even have a special crafted scoop. Only then can it stay fresh... Sir, are you feeling all right?”

Stirling rose to his feet and his face was chalk-white, asking: “Where is the bathroom?” Meanwhile, Tang Ping and the rest of Central Army Officers had already dashed for the back entrance and began throwing up.

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Suddenly, noises sounded from afar, louder and louder. Most of guests at the banquet were soldiers; they could tell right the way: It was the marching sound of an army, and it was rapidly approaching!

They each looked at each other, asking: “What is going on? Who ordered the army to enter the city?”

“I didn’t! Me neither! Are those Rebels? I don’t recall hearing the reports of rebels in the area. Besides, there are thirty thousand garrison troops stationed inside the city alone, in addition we have close to hundred thousand elites of the Central Army as well. Which Rebel force is stupid enough to attack us?”

One of Gu Lan’s guards rushed into the dining hall in panic, whispering to his ears. Gu Lan’s face instantly paled. He quickly stood up and rushed outside in a hurry together with the guard.

Stirling knew something was up; he turned to instruct Tang Ping: “Take my Commander’s Seal, and order my division and Wen He’s division to get here right now.”

Tang Ping immediately made for the entrance together with a few of his men, it didn’t take long however, and he came back, reporting to Stirling: “Sir, the Governor’s Manor has been surrounded by armed forces. We are stuck here!”

Stirling was shocked, asking: “Who are they?”

“They won’t say, but from the looks of their uniforms, they are City Deja’s garrison force.”

Stirling felt a chill down his spine: Deja’s garrison force? Aren’t they Gu Lan’s men? What is he trying to pull? Stirling terribly regretted for being so trustful; he didn’t even bring his personal guards. If only he didn’t try to rush things...

He stood up and looked around: “Where is Governor Gu Lan?” All the guests began searching for him as well, but Gu Lan was nowhere to be found!

Stirling started to panic, but he forced himself to remain composed: “Don’t worry. Deputy Commander Qin Lu has stayed behind at the Central Army base camp. Once he notices something is amiss, he will come for us.”

Stirling’s words seemed to have eased everyone’s mind. Staff Officer – Tang Ping however, still looked troubled: Even if Qin Lu sends help the moment he notices something is wrong, it is going to take at least half an hour. If Gu Lan makes his move right now, the dozen Central Army Officer here at the table won’t even last five minutes.

Stirling turned around to look at everyone at the table. Including the provincial Administrator - Liu Zi Feng, everyone was scared, trembling and in a state of panic. Even that arrogant Sir Luo Ming Hai’s distant cousin from earlier was now standing nervously on his feet... Stirling’s mouth jerked into a mocking smile, but he knew, they had nothing to do this.

Yet, there was one who continued to savour the delicacies on the table without a care in the world... The Governor of Iriya – Eeling.

Stirling knew there was more to it, he moved closer, asking: “You must know what is going on, right?”

Eeling put down his wooden sticks and answered politely: “Well Sir, it is show time! Gu Lan’s garrison force has mutinied!

# Purple River - Chapter 7.5

## Justice

Stirling eyed Eeling's satisfied smile sideways, saying: "You, come with me." then walked towards the hallway adjacent to the dining room.

Eeling seemed distracted for a moment, then quickly followed.

The empty hallway was dead silent.

Stirling took a firm stand: "Did you incite the mutiny?" He asked Eeling standing behind him without turning around.

The words caught Eeling by surprise, he hurriedly explained: "Sir, it has nothing to do with me! I'm a servant of ZiChuan. I would never do something so outrageous like that. Besides, those men are from Gu Lan's forces. I can't command them even if I tried. Also..."

As if Stirling didn't hear a thing Eeling said, he turned around smiling and asked again: "You incited the mutiny? Why would you do something like that?"

"Sir! It was pure luck that I found out about Gu Lan having problems with his men. It was a wild guess that is all. I don't know anything for certain..."

"Luck?" Stirling smiled slightly: "You, 'just happen' to sit right next to me. When someone say something, you 'just happen' to crack a smile, and let me notice it? And naturally, it was all a 'coincidence' that you told me all those stories... It must be my lucky day then that you somehow know everything there is to know about them... What is more, you 'just happen' to know that Gu Lan's forces are going to mutiny. Even though he doesn't know that himself, you somehow did!"

Stirling continued on with a gentle smile: "Sir Governor, I still remember very clearly what a friend of mine, Di Lin once told me: The first time it could be luck, the second time it could be a coincidence, but the third time..."

He moved closer towards Eeling and whispered to his ears: “It would be on purpose! So now, Governor Eeling, you purposely incited the mutiny, what do you want? You can say it now.”

Eeling’s face paled: “Sir, I really have no intention to cause anyone any harm; I merely want...”

“You merely want: First, the Far Eastern Army has always consisted of three Deputy Commanders. After Lei Hong mutinied, there is now a vacancy; Second, historically all Deputy Commanders are promoted directly from the active Red Banner Masters. Out of the twenty-three provinces in the Far East, only your province of Iriya and Gu Lan’s province of Deja survived the rebellion, therefore your accomplishment are the greatest amongst your peers, which means only you two are qualified to compete for the position of the Deputy Commander; Third, if Gu Lan’s men mutinied, regardless what the outcome would be, I wouldn’t be pleased. In other words, he would have lost the right to compete against you, and thus the juicy position of the Far Eastern Army Deputy Commander would have fallen into your hands... Is that what you want? Governor Eeling?”

All this time, Stirling still carried that gentle smile on his face, but every one of his words was like daggers aiming at Eeling’s heart. Only then did he realize, the always smiling, political ignorant young Commander whose only thoughts were about winning the war, had in fact such keen insight and acute judgment. There was no way he could fool him with a lie. Eeling always thought himself being quite competent, but in front of Stirling, he felt like a naked child. Stirling would see through him in less than a second. How ridiculous it was he had thought only a moment ago, that he could somehow make this inexperienced brat dance on the palm of his hand.

Against such opponent, the only way and also the best way, was to tell the truth.

“Sir, I admit, those thoughts have indeed crossed my mind. It was my wishful thinking that one day I could become the Deputy Commander of the Far Eastern Army.”

Stirling’s voice slowed down a little: “Water streams down, man climbs up. You



are already a Red Banner Master; it is natural to hope one day to become more. You held your ground despite being surrounded by enemies; you kept millions of lives from harm's way. You have accomplished something incredible! But you shouldn't have resorted to such underhanded tactics, framing your comrades, even inciting mutiny..."

"Sir?!" Eeling interrupted him: "You thought I was framing them?"

Stirling watched him silently.

"Sir, I admit. My motives are not pure. I want to rise, and I want to get rich. I purposely made you notice me, remember me. I tried to manipulate you into mentioning my name to the High Command, telling them that Eeling is quite capable and suited to become the next Deputy Commander! I admit completely, that I'm nothing compared to the already deceased Far Eastern Commander – Ge Ying Xing who was so honest, he never took a cent that didn't belong to him; And I'm nothing compared to Governor Lin Wei who died a hero's death on top of the walls of Minske. I also admit that I embezzled funds too, about fifteen soldiers worth. The salary of a Red Banner Master was not nearly enough to cover my expenses. I'm a coward, most of the time in battle I stand behind the lines of soldiers shouting them on. I admit to all those!"

"But..." Eeling exuded immense hatred, his teeth chattering: "Compared to the human wastes sitting inside that room, even my shit is hundred times cleaner than they are!"

"Sir! You don't believe me? I have proof! It is simple. Those assholes sitting there right now is the proof! Tang Guo is the Administrator of Lange, and now province Lange has fallen. Countless casualties, but why is he still sitting there without a scratch? Lu Hai is the Governor of Dusa. As a garrison commander, it is his duty to defend the province. What in God's name is he doing in Deja? Sir, what more proof do you need?! They have abandoned their people, abandoned their men and abandoned their district! Governor Lin Wei died, Red Banner Master Li Qi leading the assault died, three hundred thousand soldiers from the Far Eastern Army died, millions of Civilians also died... But why are they still alive, sitting there like kings? They are the root of all this evil!"

"They extorted and overtaxed non-human races by force. Even when they

were so poor they couldn't even afford their own pants, they had to pay tax! If they couldn't, they would get beaten to death! Those men in there... are animals! That is right, animals! You saw it for yourself in there; eating fresh brains is nothing new to them. Some of the stories make your hair stand on end just hearing about them. I will spare you the details; they will only give you nightmares!"

"And so, they provoked their anger, causing them to rebel. Even though it was those men's fault, that every Beastmen, Serpent and Dragonkin in the land hated us to the bones, they simply ran away... Sitting in their expensive carriages, carrying millions worth in gold and under the protection of their guards, they, their countless wives and mistresses simply ran, leaving only the helpless civilians behind to quench the Rebel's anger! It was their evil doings, but it was the soldiers and the civilians who had to pay the price! Several provinces in the Far East had some of the most prosperous cities in the whole nation. Have you seen what is left of them Sir? Did you find anything else other than a sea of human skeletons?!"

Stirling stood there quietly while listening to Eeling's moving speech. His heart was constantly being battered by tidal waves. In conjunction with everything he had seen and heard on his way here, he knew Eeling was telling the truth. In fact he already knew from seeing his indignant and reddened cheeks: The man was not telling a lie.

He said quietly: "Don't we have another good officer here? Other than Governor Lin Wei who died, didn't Governor Gu Lan also hold his ground?"

"Ha.....ha!" Eeling made an exaggerated laughter: "Gu Lan? He is worse than all those men combined! If he really was such loyal and devoted officer, why would his men want to mutiny?"

Eeling told Stirling bluntly: "When the Far Eastern Rebellion first started, Gu Lan was the first to panic. He gave his men a beyond ridiculous order; he wanted to round up all non-human populations in the province and kill them; because he was afraid of some might join the rebels. Luckily there was a well respected Division Leader in his garrison force, who brought everyone together and refused to execute the order. He told Gu Lan that if they really tried to kill them all, before the rebels even got here, they would already have a rebellion on their

hand!”

Stirling nodded in agreement: “Well said. What is that Division Leader’s name?”

Eeling answered: “His name is Garcia, a Banner Master.” Then continued: “But then came the news of Far Eastern Army’s devastating defeat at the Red Lake. Gu Lan was scared shitless, he packed everything worth of value and was ready to flee to Fort Warren. That Division Leader knew, if Governor Gu Lan had fled, the morale of the army would crumble overnight. They would have lost the fight before it even began. So he made a prompt decision and placed Gu Lan under house arrest, confining him to the Governor’s estate and stopping him from contacting any outsiders. Then he claimed to be Governor’s proxy and gave out orders in his name. He confiscated Gu Lan’s properties and sold them to cover the military expenses needed to arm the newly drafted militias. It wasn’t easy, but that was how he formed a defence force of almost hundred thousand men and thwarted the Rebel’s attacks time and time again by uniting the entire province as one. Even in such dire times, he still managed to rescue my province Iriya when we needed.”

Stirling praised: “Brave and capable! Where is he? Why isn’t he here tonight? You have to introduce me to him.”

Eeling shook his head: “Sir, he is dead.”

Stirling was abashed: “He died fighting the rebels?”

“No, Gu Lan had him assassinated.” Eeling sighed: “When the dangers passed, Gu Lan was again the mighty Governor. He called Garcia to the Governor’s Estate, promising him promotion and reward. Garcia was naïve enough to happily go there with a few accomplished fellow officers, hoping for promotion, but as expected, they were ambushed by Gu Lan’s guards and killed. Gu Lan wanted revenge, but most importantly, he was afraid of Garcia telling you what actually happened. And thus, the heroic deeds of war, doing the impossible, well, everything became Governor Gu Lan’s accomplishments. This is top secret, no one else knew. The garrison forces who surrounded us outside are all Garcia’s men; they are here to demand their officer’s release. I can’t wait to see what Gu Lan is going to tell them!”

Stirling pondered for a long time, then a rather import question came to his mind: “But how did you know all this?”

“Sir, before Gu Lan made the move against Garcia, he came to me asking for help, because Garcia is well respected in the army, and he was afraid of using his own garrison force. I refused. And before tonight’s coup, Gu Lan’s garrison force has made contact with my men, asking them to join their efforts. Together they would be able to apply more political pressure. Perhaps I haven’t been absolutely terrible to my men so far; my men refused them and even told me about it.”

“You knew Gu Lan’s garrison force is going to mutiny and you didn’t inform him?”

“Sir. I’m not his father, nor his son. Why do I have to inform him? Sir. You also have nothing to worry about. This entire coup is aimed at Gu Lan and him alone. If you tell the soldiers who you are, I’m certain that they have no intention to harm you. You can leave freely if you want to, nobody would stand in your way.

Stirling stared deeply into Eeling’s eyes, asking his last question: “Why are you telling me all these? Aren't you just like them, also a Governor in the Far Eastern Regions?”

Eeling faced Stirling’s razor sharp gazes head on, answering with confidence: “Sir, yes I’m a Governor, but I’m also a human being.”

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The gates opened wide, as a group of officers approached the rebellious soldiers. The one leading the pack was a young man, not very tall, and slightly fatigued. There was something about his stares, and it wasn’t anger, but it gave him a sense of awe that made others unable to face him. The most noticeable thing about him was the shiny golden eagle badge on his epaulet... In the entire Far Eastern Region, there were only three men who had the rights to carry that badge, and right now in the city of Deja, there was only one.

Soldiers saluted spontaneously in unison: “Sir Stirling. We salute you!”

Stirling responded with a salute: “Greetings, gentlemen.”

A leading officer stepped forward with a salute, then asked: “Sir, may I ask where you are headed?”

Stirling answered calmly: “I don’t believe I’m obligated to explain my intentions to you, do I?”

The officer was at a loss for words. He thought about it then said: “Sir, We don’t intend to harm you in anyway. We just want Gu Lan to give us our commanding officer back. We express our sincere apologies for any inconvenience we may have caused for you and your men.” He turned around and gestured to the soldiers: “Make way for Sir Stirling!”

All the soldiers behind him simultaneously stepped to their side, creating a path. The officer gave Stirling a bow and gestured “please”.

Everyone exhaled in relief. They were allowed to leave. But Stirling suddenly halted his steps, asking: “I want to know, what is everyone doing here?” All the Central Army officers anxiously stamped their feet behind Stirling: Is he crazy, why aren’t we leaving while we still can?!

The officers raised his volume slightly: “Sir, I don’t believe it concerns you. You should leave while I still have control over my men...”

Stirling interrupted him: “I’m a member of the High Command, in other words, I have the rights to concern myself with anything that happens within House ZiChuan’s borders... Unless, province Deja is no longer House ZiChuan’s territory? Or are you no longer soldiers of House ZiChuan’s army?”

The officer frowned, and a wave of disturbance began to spread throughout the soldiers behind him: They disapproved of Gu Lan’s actions, but they did not intend to rebel. The officer relented: “Sir, I have already told you. We are waiting for Gu Lan to return us our commanding officer, Banner Master Garcia... I suggest you leave right now, Sir. We all admire you greatly; it would be very unfortunate if something was to happen to...”

Stirling interrupted him again: “Thank you for your concerns. However, I’m just another soldier of House ZiChuan; my safety is no more and no less important than anyone else’s. I also want to ask, if Gu Lan is unwilling to give you your commanding officer, what do you intend to do?”

The officer declared adamantly: “We will wait, until he does!” His voice was firm, and without hesitation. He fully intended to be true to his words.

Stirling was moved by his determination: A Banner Master called Garcia, someone whom he had never met, for some reason had such powerful charisma. Even after his death, his men were still so loyal to him. They would even attempt a coup if it meant they could secure his release! Given time, a man like that would definitely become the priceless treasure of ZiChuan, a hero amongst men... Of course, if only he was still alive...

Stirling sighed: "Banner Master Garcia is no more."

The news came as a shock. Noises soon exploded from the group of soldiers in front of him. Eeling pulled at his hairs in frustration: Why is he telling them at a time like this?! If the soldiers lose control, the outcome...

The officer couldn't believe his ears: "What? How? Impossible? Sir Garcia was such a great man, how..." Seeing Stirling's solemn expression, it hit him like a wrecking ball: It was all true.

A tall husky fellow instantly collapsed, he slowly dropped to his knees and pulled his head together in tears.

The soldiers whimpered: "Sir Garcia is gone? What do we do now? Who will lead us? Who will defend Deja? Damn you, Gu Lan!"

A voice shouted: "Gu Lan must die!"

And many more voices answered: "Yes! Let's go and hang Gu Lan by the neck!" Several soldiers took the lead; they were practically fuming with rage, unsheathing their sabres and ready for violence.

"Stop!" A thunderous roar had frozen everyone where they stood. Stirling's shadow planted firmly in front of the gate, like an unmovable mountain he had blocked the soldiers' path: "Soldiers! Do you realize what you are doing? This is mutiny!"

"You have lost your admired officer; House ZiChuan has lost one of its finest servants... We all feel the pain! I understand how you feel! But do you realize, what you are about to do? If you go in there now, and stain your blade with blood, you will be traitors, unforgivable traitors!"

"We are soldiers. We do not fear death! But there are worse things in life than death! If you die, your families will mourn your passing from a place far away.

They will shed tears in your honour, remember you, they will bring the whitest of all flowers to your grave every year and announce with pride: ‘My good husband, my good sons, they gave their lives in the service of our nation, they have no regret in the eyes of God or anyone else!’ Your sons will be proud to carry your name, he will stand before others with his head held high!”

“But if you die as a traitor, who will remember you? Who will mourn your death? Your body will not be publicly buried. It will be thrown away to the dogs! Your name will bring shame to your entire family. Your sons and wives will never again be able to raise their heads in front of their neighbours! Soldiers, please have restraint and stay calm!”

Stirling’s words echoed in everyone’s ears like clear thunder. All the soldiers halted their steps, listening attentively. A soldier yelled: “Do we leave Sir Garcia’s death unavenged? Has he died for nothing?”

Stirling declared in a stern voice: “May Sir Garcia’s spirit forever watch over us! Soldiers, I promise you right here and now: Justice will be served! That is me, Stirling, my promise to everyone as the Central Army Commander! Banner Master Garcia has served his nation with great distinction. Despite his unfortunate death, I, on behalf of the High Command, shall award him with the posthumous promotion of the rank Deputy Commander! Everyone, listen to me! On behalf of House ZiChuan, I beg you, return to your camp. I promise, I will give you a satisfying answer!”

The soldiers hesitated, and argued. In the end, it was that teary officer who stood up. He wiped his eyes and said to Stirling: “Sir. You made us a promise!”

Stirling replied without hesitation: “I did! I will give you justice! That is my promise!”

“All right! Sir Stirling! We trust you! We will do as you say!” The officer stared deeply into Stirling’s eyes, then turned around, shouting: “A-ten-shun! To the left! Forward!” Soldiers readily followed suit; marching away in large formation, and slowly disappearing into the distance. Soon only the rhythmic sound of their boots remained, quieter and quieter...

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Everyone was relieved that bloodshed was avoided. Tang Ping and other

Central Army Officers hurriedly complained to Stirling for his unnecessary recklessness: What if the soldiers didn't listen...

Stirling smiled back, telling them he had everything under control. He knew what it was like being a soldier and how they felt.

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Eeling stared at Stirling, his action had left him stunned: In that moment, when Stirling stood alone in front of the group of angry soldiers, the image of Stirling's imposing figure and his awe-inspiring appearance was deeply engraved in his mind. Eeling had only one sentence to describe what he saw: Beyond reproach. Then, a thought had popped into his head: "Stirling will one day become a man amongst man."

Stirling's smile suddenly turned sour: A group of Far Eastern Officers came out from the hiding place in the back. The one walking in front was no other than the missing Governor Gu Lan from earlier!

He quickly approached them with a flattering smile on his face, speaking loudly: "Phew! Sir Stirling. That was close. Luckily you were here. You overwhelmed those ungrateful fools with your presence alone! We were all cheering for you. You single-handedly sent them packing! Your fearlessness is only matched by your peerless courage! You truly opened our eyes today!"

The rest of his group hastily added: "That is right, Stirling is clearly the bravest warrior of ZiChuan!"

The Central Army Officers all looked at them with contempt: Where the hell were you guys earlier? Coming out now to gloat!

Stirling smiled uncaringly.

Eeling couldn't stand their shamelessness anymore, and sneered: "You all came out just in time!"

Gu Lan continued in his cheeky tone: "I was planning to come out much sooner to fight alongside with Sir Stirling, but my stomach was acting up. It must be something I ate. I had to go to the bathroom... by the time I came out... well, thanks to Sir Stirling's invincible gallantry, overcoming thousands of enemies all by himself..."



Before he could finish, a large contingent of soldiers had appeared from both ends of the street.

Gu Lan's face instantly paled: "Shit, my stomach, Ouch. It is acting up again... Sir, hold on, I will be..." He was ready to turn and run, but Stirling's powerful arm had clenched his shoulder, rendering him unable to move.

Stirling smiled: "Governor Gu Lan, there is no need for panic. Take a closer look, those are my men!"

Despite his thick skins, Gu Lan only managed to mutter a few soft laughter under his breath, unable to speak.

Central Army Deputy Commander – Qin Lu arrived with a whole division of infantry. He said to Stirling laughingly: "I heard some rebellious soldiers surrounded the Governor's Estate and I came to help. But by the looks of it, I came for nothing."

Stirling laughed back: "You didn't come for nothing. Let me introduce: This one is DeJa's Governor – Gu Lan, this one is the local Administrator – Liu Zi Feng, over here we have Administrator - Luo Lin Shuang, Governor - Lu Hai, Administrator - Tang Guo, and we also have a celebrity at our hands..." He introduced every one of them to Qin Lu. Feeling flattered, everyone hurriedly stepped forward and shook Qin Lu's hand.

Finally, still smiling, Stirling said: "They are the nobles and the high ranking officers of Far East, the soul of ZiChuan! Qin Lu, have you memorized their names?"

Qin Qu wasn't quite sure what Stirling meant, he answered honestly: "Yes, I have memorized their names."

"Good!" Stirling wiped away his smile, revealing a dense aura of killing intent between his eyes: "Take them all into custody!"

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Arresting over a dozen high ranking officers all of a sudden, even Stirling wasn't sure how to best handle the situation. When he asked for advice from his men, each suggested something different, leaving him even more confused than before. In the end, he decided to write a letter to Di Lin and ZiChuan Xiu, asking

them for advice.

ZiChuan Xiu was shocked when he received the letter. He knew people like Gu Lan wasn't the problem, but the faction of power behind them was not something to be trifled with. Stirling had just stirred up the hornet's nest.

He hastily wrote back to Stirling, suggesting: There are two solutions to the problem: One, release them all and apologize to them in person, pretending as if nothing ever happened; (Stirling shook his head repeatedly) Two, kill them all, and blame their deaths on the rebels. Letting any of them live is a recipe for disaster!

Stirling did not approve either of ZiChuan Xiu's suggestions: Yes, Gu Lan and the others are guilty for many things, but not all of them deserve to die. Also, they have the rights to a fair trial, and to be tried on legal ground. Charges need to be brought forth and they need be punished in accordance to the law. Only then can we have justice! If he kills them in secret, how can he claim to be just? And how is he any different from Gu Lan who killed Garcia in secret?

Stirling liked Di Lin's idea much better. Di Lin officially dispatched a company of constables together with a juridical officer to take over the custody of the offenders from him. Stirling was overjoyed when he saw their arrival; he quickly handed juridical officer the letter of accusation. He had to work whole night to get it finished in time. In it contained the large amount of proof and witness statements he had managed to gather. He told the officer: "I wrote the letter myself. It contains all the details of what they are being accused of: Desertion, Corruption, Murder, Dereliction of Duty and many other charges. Please present the letter to the Judge during Court Martial."

The juridical officer responded politely: "Rest assured, Sir. The ministry will give them a fair trial, and judge them in all honesty and fairness. They will get the punishments they deserve!"

The officer bid his farewell and left with the offenders. They didn't get very far however, near the forest at the first intersection after leaving the province of Deja, the officer gave the order to hang Gu Lan and others by their necks from the tree.

Watching Gu Lan's feet swinging back and forth in mid air, Cobra... the juridical

officer, who was in reality Di Lin's personal guard Captain, grabbed Stirling's letter of accusation from his bag and set it on fire. He turned to ask one of the constables: "Anyone needs to lit a pipe?"

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Captain Cobra raced to Fort Warren as fast as he could. As the envoy of the Inspector General, he requested an audience with Commander Fang Jin, and was granted a private meeting. After they discussed for a while behind closed doors, Captain Cobra left, very quietly. All the constables he left the Capital with, stayed behind and were sent for the frontline as vanguards by Commander Fang Jin.

The next day, a report came from Commander Fang Jing: "Province Deja and Iriya were under attack by unknown Rebel forces. Thanks to the courageous display of every soldier and civilian alike, the Rebel Army was finally repelled! Governor - Gu Lan, Administrator - Liu Zi Feng, Garrison Division Leader – Garcia, Administrator - Luo Lin Shuang and other thirteen high ranking officers all fought bravely in battle, and were unfortunately killed in action. The pain of grief has struck us all. It is my recommendation for the High Command to award the listed officers with posthumous promotions for their valiant efforts. Attachment: A list of all personnel who died in the battle and their heroic deeds."

When the report reached the High Command, Luo Ming Hai quickly handed it over to ZiChuan Shen Xing for review.

ZiChuan Shen Xing lamented: "Who says officers of House ZiChuan are all cowards? Who says we have no heroes amongst us? This is proof! No matter how dire the situation is, as long as we still have such spirit of heroism in our hearts, as long as we still have such brave men amongst us, there is no mountain we can't climb, no river we can't cross! They are all finest of House ZiChuan. We should award them accordingly, to encourage the newcomers and to show the people that we are Just! The word 'Justice' is what House ZiChuan was founded upon..."

"Di Lin, what do you say?" He turned to Di Lin. When the reports came, Di Lin happened to be reporting his recent work from the Ministry.

Di Lin humbly bowed his head: "Well said, Sir. Those were wise words! Do good deeds, and be rewarded, do evil and be punished. That is what justice is!"

# Purple River - Chapter 7.6

## Joint Council

When Captain Cobra returned to the Ministry, Di Lin was fully dressed and ready to depart. His final instructions for his men were: "Listen up. Remember to give them that menacing look and don't smile, put your hand on the sword hilt, and when you speak, make sure everyone hears you. Today, you need to be that badass I taught you to be, even if to a random stranger on the street asking for directions!"

The officers complied with no questions asked, pulling up their sleeves, one looking more threatening than the next. Even when they walked, the sabres around their waist clashed loudly against the inside of the scabbard with each movement. Their sinister and dangerous look made one wonder if House Liu Feng's army had invaded the Capital.

Cobra knew: Di Lin was getting ready to attend the "Joint Council". The so called "Joint Council" was based on Headmaster - ZiChuan Shen Xing's idea. Its purpose was to improve the communication between the High Command and the Ministry, increasing mutual trust, reducing friction, encouraging unity, broadening perspective and solving problems! Or so he said.

But according to Captain Cobra: "ZiChuan Shen Xing has never fully intended for the High Command and the Ministry to work together! Just imagine putting Di Lin and Luo Ming Hai alone in a room, one would eat the other alive! A council with both of them together, what problems could they hope to solve?

It was for that very same reason that every time the "Joint Council" proceeded following the exact same unchanging cycle of events.

1. Everyone takes seat.
2. ZiChuan Shen Xing makes the opening statement. (Telling how dire the situation is, that everyone should put their personal interests aside and work together for the greater good.)
3. Luo Ming Hai makes his report.
4. Di Lin mocks him. (Saying a donkey would have done a better job!)
5. Luo Ming Hai counters with personal attacks. (Calling him all kind of names.)
6. Beginning of the shouting contest ("....." Around two hundred words had been redacted from this page. It was mostly about how willing one was to get involved with the other's close female relatives in an illegal or forceful manner, and how generous the act would have been considering how ugly the opposite sex was.)
7. Once the contest reached the critical point, in order to further illustrate their deep hatred for one and other, they would turn the shouting contest into a spitting contest. (They were both gifted men with great martial prowess and a greater deal of lung capacity. They could even turn spits into weapon, except their aim left much to be desired. Most of the attacks were unfortunately wasted on the Headmaster.)
8. Throwing tea cups.(In order to lower the monthly expenses, before each of their meeting, the Department of Interior would switch out all porcelain cups for metal ones, even so, many were broken beyond repair. Later, after Ge Shan was promoted to the Chief of Staff, she reprimanded them harshly: "Idiots! Why don't you use paper cups instead?"
9. Mutual provocation. ("Come at me if you dare?!" "Oh yeah, you think you can stop me?" "Come and find out!" "Make me!" and the vicious cycle of philosophical questions whether eggs came first or chicken came first continued.)
10. Violence. (ZiChuan Shen Xing had to remind them: "We don't have much time left, can you get back to business!" Only then did those two who were still indulged in philosophical debate finally realize: "That is right, we can't waste any more time. We need to get down to business!" Since they weren't allowed inside with weapons, chairs quickly became their

weapons, but the last time they were made to sit on sofa's, and those were made of Red Nanmu<sup>[1]</sup>, incredibly heavy. After that brawl, both of them almost died from overexertion, thus preserving the status quo.)

11. ZiChuan Shen Xing's rage: "Do you even realize what you are doing? Where are your dignity and pride?" (By his command, a large group of imperial guards would rush in, batons in hand; beating down any troublemaker they see with complete disregard to what positions they might hold, Supreme Commander or Inspector General alike, and separating them by force.)
12. Accept severe punishments while made to self reflect.
13. Meeting adjourned. (Time to go home and sleep.)

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Di Lin seemed satisfied with the menacing looks his officers were making: "Good! That is what I am talking about! Scare them to death!" He noticed Captain Cobra through the corner of his eye, and called for him: "You returned? How is the vacation? Did you get to talk to your uncle? How is he?" A series of casual inquiries.

Cobra understood the meaning behind Di Lin's words, answering politely: "You are too kind, Sir. My vacation was great, I couldn't have wished for more. My uncle is great too. He asked me to let you know that he wishes you well. Since my distant cousin has been fighting the war in the Far East, I told my uncle to keep an eye out for anyone or any letters coming through the provinces of Deja and Iriya." (Sir, everything was dealt with, leaving no traces to be found. Commander Fang Jin continued to follow your order to the letter. I have told him to watch for anyone or letters coming from province Deja or Iriya, making sure that nothing slips through.)

Seeing Captain Cobra's dust covered army uniform, what was once black was now brown; Di Lin could tell that he came as soon as he could without even stopping by home. Di Lin nodded in approval, praising him silently: "Even though I didn't instruct him about the letters, he came to the idea on his own.

But Di Lin also knew Cobra was in reality ZiChuan Shen Xing's agent, put in

place to keep an eye on him. They had always maintained that special kind of relationship of mutual understanding: Di Lin knew who Cobra was, but never exposed him. He even got him to do all his dirty work. Meanwhile, Cobra knew exactly how to handle the mission ZiChuan Shen Xing gave him. Whenever he needed to write his secret report, he would always show it to Di Lin first with the excuses of: "Sir, how do I write this word? I don't remember, can you teach me?"

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"Cobra, are you feeling tired? You can go home if you wish." Di Lin asked.

"No need, Sir. Given the weight of the occasion, it would be strange if I'm not around." What Cobra really meant was: As the Captain of your personal guard, who was also nicknamed as "Di Lin's Shadow", if I'm suddenly not by your side and let the paranoid ZiChuan Shen Xing notice my absence, it could become problematic if he started investigating my whereabouts.

Di Lin immediately understood Cobra's thoughts, patting him on his shoulder as comfort: "Thank you!"

Cobra glanced around Di Lin's escort, noticing a couple weakly, sickly men amongst them. He turned to Di Lin: "Sir, shouldn't we bring a couple tougher looking ones instead? They look..."

Di Lin smiled: "Cobra, did you forget? During the last meeting, Luo Ming Hai purposely let one of his disgusting midget spit at me, I totally lost out on that exchange! Today I shall have my revenge!"

Cobra sounded surprised, throwing his puzzled looks at the few sickly men in front of him while wondering how they could possibly avenge anything. He hesitated: "Are they... great at spitting?"

"Not really." Di Lin whispered closer to Cobra's ears: "They are all suffering from an infectious form of tuberculosis."

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Everyone took their seats; both Luo Ming Hai and Di Lin consciously took the two chairs furthest away from each other on opposite sides of the room. Between them, officers from the High Command and officers from the Ministry lined up orderly in two rows, forming two opposing factions, separating Luo

Ming Hai and Di Lin like two opposite poles of the same magnet. ZiChuan Shen Xing took the seat at the center of the table, watching over both of them with his kind and proud gaze, like a parent watching over two of his stubborn and spoiled sons.

Di Lin frowned. Amongst the officers of the High Command he spotted the former commanding officer of ZiChuan Xiu, Chief Ge Shan. She was known for her diligence and intensity. Hence she had always been omitted from the meeting, but his time Luo Ming Hai thought it fit to bring her along, suggesting that perhaps this time, Luo Ming Hai really had something important to discuss.

Di Lin sighed. If that really was the case, his deliberately prepared counter attack would have to be cancelled.

ZiChuan Shen Xing made the opening statement, the same exact words he had used thousand times before, pointless and boring. Yet, Di Lin had little choice but to fake the same inspired and appreciative look every time, showing how meaningful and memorable Headmaster's words were.

Next up, Luo Ming Hai began reporting the latest events to the Headmaster. The most important part of his report was about the war in the Far East. Luo Ming Hai continued: "Let me read you the latest report from the Far Eastern Front First Commander, Ming Hui..."

"In response to the Headmaster and the Supreme Commander..."

Officers from the Ministry standing on the opposite side of the room interrupted him in unison: "The war in the Far East has come to its time of greatest danger!"

Luo Ming Hai stared at Di Lin angrily: "Di Lin, you are in Headmaster's presence. Are you incapable of keeping your men under control?!"

Di Lin replied nonchalantly: "Why? Are my Officers not allowed to express their humble opinions regarding the war in the Far East in front of the Headmaster? What does any of it have to do with you?!"

Luo Ming Hai was furious as if his veins were about to burst. He was well known for always being calm. Ever since he became the Supreme Commander, he even turned it up a notch. Except when he was with Di Lin, all that calm and



poise instantly went up in smoke. Di Lin was exceptionally gifted when it came to teasing and making people angry. As long as he used his special kind of unique, prolonged and curled nobleman accent, and that who gives a damn attitude, saying a few words while being completely oblivious to the one he is speaking to, all the while looking down upon the person through the corner of his eye... he could even get the dead to rise from under the ground only to die again!" Those were ZiChuan Xiu's words.

ZiChuan Shen Xing tried to mediate the situation: "Calm down, both of you. Di Lin, tell your men to keep quiet. Luo Ming Hai, please continue."

Luo Ming Hai grimaced at Di Lin, then continued: "In response to the Headmaster and the Supreme Commander, the war in the Far East has come to its time of greatest danger!"

Every officer on the side of the Ministry burst out in laughter, even some of High Command's officer laughed helplessly under their breath: Ever since Luo Ming Hai recommended Ming Hui for the position of the First Commander in the Far Eastern Front, every Tuesday and Thursday the Far Eastern Regions would find itself "in time of greatest danger", and naturally, when confronted with such danger, the request was for more men, more supplies and more money.

Luo Ming Hai added: "Ming Hui's report for October 7th is as follows: 'In such dangerous time, if I don't receive more reinforcement or anything less than a whole division, our line would crumple completely!'"

ZiChuan Shen Xing looked annoyed: "That bloody riffraff, he is threatening us again. Tell him, no more reinforcement!"

Luo Ming Hai nodded: "Yes. I told him right the way: "if our line crumples, he is the first one getting court-martialled!"

ZiChuan Shen Xing applauded: "Well said! Good work! So why did you still send reinforcement afterwards?"

"Because he sent me another report later, saying: 'In such dangerous time, if you give me one more division, I can make the enemy lines crumple!'"

Di Lin sneered at him sitting across: "He just changed the words, and you got fooled again."

Even ZiChuan Shen Xing complained, scolding him slightly: “Indeed, Luo Ming Hai, he just wanted one division, you shouldn’t have taken three integrated divisions off the western border just for him!”

“But he sent the same report three times in a row...”

Di Lin laughed dryly while staring at the ceiling as if he was saying “I have no words for such stupidity’. Even though he never said the words out loud, it made Luo Ming Hai hundred times angrier than any words would.

ZiChuan Shen Xiu laughed too, shaking his head, lamenting: “The Far East is such a black hole. Over the last few months, we have sent over forty divisions, almost three hundred thousand men, spending billions on military expenses, and yet, the end is nowhere in sight. What do we do? Di Lin, you have been to the Far East before. What do you suggest?”

Di Lin answered politely: “Sir, I believe we must stop withdrawing troops from the western border for the time being. Currently, the men power balance on the western border is getting close to two against three in comparison to House Liu Feng’s forces, and in some areas along the border, the ratio even dropped to a dangerous one against two. If we withdraw anymore men, we risk leaving the western front exposed. If that bitch Liu Feng Shuang start getting funny ideas, we may lose more than we risk to gain.”

ZiChuan Shen Xing nodded: “I agree. Even though House Liu Feng has its own set of internal problems, we shouldn’t underestimate her. So how do we respond to Ming Hui’s request for reinforcement then?”

“We will have to invest more in the newly formed militia army, Sir.” Di Lin knew Luo Ming Hai was in charge of reforming the militia army; he purposely threw the hot potato his way.

Gritting his teeth, Luo Ming Hai answered grudgingly: “Sir, due to harvest season, most of the able men are staying at home helping with the field work. We haven’t been getting many new recruits lately... The situation should improve once the harvest season ends.”

ZiChuan Shen Xing frowned: “But... the situation is dire, and the war does not wait! What if we hire a couple mercenary groups? It is much faster, and they are also more experienced than militias.”

Luo Ming Hai wasn't sure how to answer: "Sir... can we let Ge Shan explain the situation."

ZiChuan Shen Xing agreed.

Ge Shan stepped forth, bowing politely to ZiChuan Shen Xing. She looked confident and spoke clearly: "Per Headmaster, Supreme Commander and Inspector's inquiries, if we wish to create mercenary divisions, the estimated initial cost for each division would be around hundred-and-ten million, and its monthly upkeep would be around thirty million. In comparison, a regular division will only cost around fifty million, and its monthly upkeep is only seven million. Our total military expense of this year authorized by the Council of Elder is seventeen billion and eight-hundred-thirty-two million. Ever since the war in the Far East started, we are running at a heavy deficit. So far we have spent nearly thirty-three billion and two-hundred-and-fifty-one million, and it is only barely November right now. That is more than two months away from the end of the fiscal year in January, at this rate we are looking at over forty billion in military spending this year. If we try to form the expensive mercenary division now, we won't be able to explain ourselves to the Council."

Ge Shan's words were direct and efficient, throwing dozens of exact numbers without a second thought. As expected from the most able servant of the High Command.

Di Lin listened attentively at Ge Shan's brief report, but his attention was not focused on the details of her report: There was something interesting going on between Ge Shan and Luo Ming Hai. Ge Shan had always been known for her diligence and daring honesty. As long as there was something she didn't approve, no matter who the other person was, she would rain hell upon them. Once due to difference in opinion, she publicly criticized and humiliated her commanding officer, Luo Ming Hai. The argument got so heated even the onlookers were worried... But somehow, Luo Ming Hai continued to support her even after that. Last time during the rebellion in the Capital, it was also Luo Ming Hai who spoke in her defence after her unfavourable opinions got her into trouble... Now he even recommended her for the position of Chief of Staff.

If his request was approved, then she will be the first female member in the High Command.

Di Lin considered carefully: “Ignoring the grievances between himself and the man, he had to admit, Luo Ming Hai did have a keen eye for talents. He was also very skilled in handling civil affairs and logistic works. Not to mention he wasn’t greedy and didn’t abuse his power... he being the Supreme Commander was not the worst thing in the world... at the very least, he was much better than the former Supreme Commander. The only unfortunately thing was... He hated him more than anything...”

While Di Lin’s thought wandered, ZiChuan Shen Xing asked Ge Shan: “Then in your opinion, we shouldn’t form any mercenary divisions for now?”

“Correct.” Ge Shan responded swiftly: “Or else our deficit would be too great, and we will have troubles explaining it to the Council.” She added bluntly, lacking any of the tactfulness, respect or timid attitude expected from a servant: “Sir, in your infinite wisdom, if I may share my humble opinion...”

Di Lin smirked, thinking: “No wonder! Even with Luo Ming Hai’s backing, given her straightforward temperament, there is no way she will ever sit on the chair of the Chief of Staff.”

ZiChuan Shen Xing was clearly not pleased about her, but he remained silent.

Luo Ming Hai quickly changed the subject: “Sir, Ming Hui also proposed a large-scale battle plan, seeking our approval. Operation codename ‘Blue Moon’. The battle plan involves nearly four hundred thousand men in its operations, including the bulk of the Black Banner Army and the Central Army, and over two-hundred-thousand militia forces. The scale of this operation is so great, that Ming Hui dared not to make the decision on his own, hence the request. If the plan succeeds, there is a chance we may end the Far Eastern War before year’s end!”

As he expected, he quickly attracted ZiChuan Shen Xing’s full attention: “Huh? What plan? Let’s hear it.”

“Yes, Sir!” Luo Ming Hai summoned forth a staff officer: “Lay out the battle map.”

“Ming Hui’s plan is as followed: The bulk of the Far Eastern Rebel Army has gathered in the dense forest and mountain areas in the province of Yun, hoping to break through our blockades. Both Ming Hui’s and Stirling’s forces have

attempted to keep them contained by setting up defences along the edge of the forest areas leading into Yun. However, due to the fact that most of our regular forces come from the core areas of ZiChuan, and are not used to fighting in the forest and mountains, we have obtained very little success so far and suffered a great deal of casualties.”

“Ming Hui’s plan is, to simply let them out. Black Banner Army shall fake a retreat and lure the Rebel Army into the intersection of the Blue River and Grey River. It is an open-plain area called the Three Branched River. Once the Black Banner Army makes it across, they will destroy the bridges and barricade themselves on their side of the river, stopping the Rebel Army from crossing. Meanwhile, Central Army and Fang Jin’s Militia army will surround and hit the Rebel Army from behind. The open-plain of the Three Branching River is an area surrounded by river on both side. With bridges destroyed on one side, and their only other way out being cut off by the Central Army and the Militia Forces, in less than a month, they will have to either surrender or starve to death. Once we defeat the bulk of the Rebel Army, rest of the rebellion forces in the Far East will collapse on its own.”

Di Lin already knew where it was going before he finished, sneering: “Of course, a typical grand plan coming from Ming Hui!”

He explained to ZiChuan Shen Xing: “Sir, I believe this plan is most unfair. Once Ming Hui’s forces make it across the river and destroy the bridges, the Rebel Army will most likely be deterred from chasing any further, and when the Rebel Army realizes they are trapped in the Three Branching River, with no way out, they will do whatever they can to survive, the same as if you back a dog into a corner, it is going to bite. In other words, it is the Central Army that will have to absorb the blunt of Rebel Army’s counter attack! They will be left exposed in the open, with no way to defend themselves! Meanwhile, all Ming Hui needed to do is to sit leisurely on the other side of the Blue River, and ‘barricade’ themselves, clapping their hands, shouting: “Go, Stirling Go!” How is this a fair plan?”

Before ZiChuan Shen Xing made any comment, Lu Ming Hai already rushed to speak: "Commander Stirling knew the gravity of the situation better than anyone; he had already agreed to the proposal!"

Di Lin refuted stubbornly: "That is Sir Stirling for you, always tackling the most

difficult task himself, loyal to a fault! But our Headmaster is the manifestation of benevolence; he cares for his servants more than he cares for himself, naturally he would not agree to let Stirling shoulder such unfair responsibility all by himself."

"How is it all by himself? Isn't Fang Jin's militia there as well?"

"Ha, Luo Ming Hai. Those useless militias you have recruited, I can crush a hundred thousand of them with only one of my divisions; they are merely ants waiting to be trampled over! Sir, even though officially, Militia Army will be part of the attacking force, most of the work will no doubt fall on Stirling's Central Army. His forces have fought nonstop for months, suffering through countless battles. The number of his casualty is sky high! Only letting the sons of Di Du bleed, that is not fair at all, Sir! Stirling's forces should be the one luring the enemy in, while Ming Hui's forces should be put in charge of the encirclement, how is that?"

"Di Lin, stop spewing nonsense! Didn't Central Army just came back rested from the province of DeJa? The Black Banner Army has killed way more rebels, several millions in fact, way more than Stirling did!"

"Luo Ming Hai you dumb ass fool! The whole world knew Ming Hui has greatly exaggerated the numbers in his report, only you are still trying to defend him. What are your motives? Central Army's casualty ratio has reached over thirty-five percent. Do you really think a week or two resting could restore that? Shut the fuck up if you have no clue about military affairs!"

"Di Lin, you little shit, what proof do you have saying Ming Hui's report are false? How dare you claim to know anything about war?! You just killed a few peasants! What is there to be proud of?! I..."

"Enough!" ZiChuan Shen Xing smacked down on the table: "Both of you!"

Both Di Lin and Luo Ming Hai bowed at the same time, apologizing earnestly for their insolent behaviour in their Master's presence.

ZiChuan Shen Xing exhaled deeply: "You two idiots are going to be the death of me one day." He turned to Ge Shan: "Ge Shan, what do you think?"

Everyone seemed surprised: They all saw ZiChuan Shen Xing's annoyed look

earlier while talking to Ge Shan, and yet, overlooking so many other high ranking officers in the room, he specially asked for her opinion.

Di Lin understood the reasoning right the way: Amongst all the people sitting here, they were either on his side or on Luo Ming Hai's, leaving only Ge Shan isolated from both. Her point of view was the neutral one.

Ge Shan stood up, answering: "Sir, I'm not a field officer, but since you asked, I can only say what i know: 'The Far East is thousand miles from here, just exchanging a message will take weeks. We can never know what is going on over there in the most recent time, therefore it is unwise to force an order on them which could potentially waste any opportunities that might rise at a moment's notice on the field of battle.'"

Her words were fuelled by logic and reasoning, not favouring either side. Despite the earlier arguments, both camps nodded in approval.

"So in your opinion..."

"Sir Ming Hui, Sir Stirling and Sir Fang Jin, those three Commanders at the Far Eastern Front are all experienced generals and veterans of war, not some fools toying with things they don't know. We just need to worry about providing them with the necessary supplies, and leave the battle planning to the experts. Tell them that: "The goal is to put an end to the war as soon as possible, everything else, they may do as they see fit!" The three Commanders are there in person, they know the situation best, therefore they should know how to best handle it. They don't need us to telling them what to do."

# Purple River - Chapter 7.7

## Council of Elders

Imperial Calendar, Year 779, Early December, House ZiChuan's 78th General Assembly of the Council of Elders was held in advance.

The Assembly was originally scheduled for next year's august, but Speaker of the Council, Xiao Ping made the following statement: "This year we have had Yang Ming Hua's rebellion in the Capital and the ongoing war in the Far East. As elders, we represent the public interest and hopes of every citizen living in House ZiChuan. How could we sit idly by during such turbulent time and important moment in family's history?"

All the elders appeared to be in agreement: "Exactly, that is why we are here!" Each of the five thousand elders attending the assembly took turn to make their opening statement, and the first two days went by.

But Di Lin thought it differently: "Tch! They are just bored, using it as an excuse to get away from home!" Even the usually brazen Di Lin would only speak those words in front of his trusted Captain, and doing so, in whispers.

He was not the only one. Back when Yang Ming Hua was still in power and stood on the top of the world, even he had to obey Council's orders, The Council of Elders was the highest ruling body of House ZiChuan and held the highest decision-making power, and not just in name only. In reality, the council of today was a gathering of all the influential families and nobles of the seventy-nine provinces in House ZiChuan. They held great influences over all matters concerning the House, both politically and economically. Their decisions could very easily alter the future of the House. The current Headmaster, ZiChuan Shen Xing would not have been able to ascend without the Council's support, and thus even he had to pay them respect.

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On the third day of the assembly, the real conversation had finally started. An elder from the province of Locke raised an important question concerning all the attendees: "This year's military expenses greatly exceeded the allotted budget! Yes, there is the Far Eastern Rebellion, but surely it shouldn't have been this much. We have spent more than twice of the initial budget! Couple of years back, when we had to fight House Liu Feng, there was even a greater amount of men-power being involved, but we have never had such deficit as of today! Could it be something else going on? Did someone from the High Command embezzle the funds somewhere along the way, filling their own pockets at the cost of jeopardizing House ZiChuan's future?"

Elders agreed in unison: Something fishy must be going on! Another elder suggested: "We should go through this year's expenditure from the Military Affairs Department, the Logistic Department and other big money spenders, and get to the bottom of this!" After two days of consecutive voting, the resolution was passed unanimously.

Speaker of the Council, Xiao Ping announced: Hereby, we are announcing the establishment of a new committee, in charge of investigations concerning the Military Affairs Department's and the Logistic Department's recent expenditures. The committee shall be led by ten representatives chosen from the Council. All properties of the departments in question shall be seized and their funds frozen, until the investigation has been concluded!"

The announcement was received by a standing ovation from the Council members. It wasn't that they really had serious problems with either of the departments, but there was only one Assembly every three years. Most of the time outside the assembly, they were simply being ignored. Now that they finally had the power in hand, they felt the need to start making some waves, and an opportunity to test their new found power couldn't have come sooner. Like a kid who just bought a new umbrella, hoping every day the next day would rain. Even if it didn't, he would still bring it with him.

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Two weeks later, the investigation fever had reached an all time high. Even the honest, virtuous and well reputable Central Army Commander – Stirling, was being accused. The accuser was an elder from the distant land of the Far East; He

came here to represent a group of Beastmen, Serpents, Dwarves and other non-human races. He was soaked in tears when he told his story to the council: “We are the most loyal citizens of ZiChuan! Yes, there may have been some unpleasantness between us and the Army, but those were just misunderstandings! Terrible, unfortunate misunderstandings! We never had any issues with anyone but the local oppressing nobles. For our benevolent Headmaster, we have nothing but love from the bottom of our hearts and soul!”

“Right, where was I? Hold on, let me check my notes. Right, as I was saying. We have had some misunderstandings with the Central Army, but we have realized our mistakes and corrected them. We are not saints, and like anyone else, we all make mistakes! We have sincerely apologized many times for our wrongdoings, trying to restore the peace.”

“But that Stirling, he was relentless and kept killing us even though all we did was running away. His cruelty knows no bounds. Even though we told him many times that we were wrong and didn’t want to fight anymore. He continued to spill more blood from our brothers and sisters.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way. We, the people of the Far East are the bravest men and women in the world. We are not afraid of that Stirling, but out of our respect for the Headmaster. We will simply overlook his transgressions this once... And yet, out of greed for fame and honour, he wouldn’t stop until he wiped us all out!”

“In short, it was all Stirling’s fault, if he didn’t fight back...”

“Oops, I mean, if he didn’t purposely try to provoke us, none of this would have happened, and the Far East would have been at peace by now! We can no longer tolerate his aggressive behaviour. Therefore we hope the honourable elders of this council will give us, the honest and loyal citizens of ZiChuan, a just result, and punish Stirling for his actions. We have never wanted anything else than to live in peace. Let us work together and turn the Far East into the paradise it could have been.”

The Rebels wished to negotiate for peace! The news couldn’t have come at a better time for the Council of Elders struggling to find a solution for the excessive military expenses. After a whole day and night of negotiating terms, the Council

of Elders and the Rebel representative had reached a temporary cease fire agreement.

On the following day, Council of Elders sent the order to the Far East: “To all units of House ZiChuan’s Army currently active in the Far East, hold your current position with no exceptions. All offensive operations have been suspended. Await further instructions once the negotiation between the Council of Elders and the Rebel representative has concluded!”

At the same time, the Council of Elders recalled the Central Army Commander – Stirling from the frontline to face his accusations in the Capital: Why did he display such cruelty against the people of the Far East? Was it due to greed? Or did he purposely try to prolong the war?

# Purple River - Chapter 7.8

## Chapter 07 Part 08 – Reunion

Imperial Calendar, Year 779, December, Stirling received the recall order and was on his way returning to the Capital. When he passed by Xiu's Company's base camp, he decided to visit his good friend, ZiChuan Xiu. Two good friends separated by the flames of war on the vast battlefield of the Far East had finally reunited, and the touching scenes of reunion ensued...

"Congratulations, Master Xiu! I heard you have been making a pretty penny lately!"

"Hoho, thank you! Bai Chuan, bring us some tea! So, how is business? Scored anything big?"

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All the Officers took the hint and left, leaving only Stirling and ZiChuan Xiu in the room.

ZiChuan Xiu asked: "Stirling, what brings you here? Isn't the Central Army marching for the frontlines? Who is in charge if you are not there?"

Stirling smiled bitterly and told him the story, pulling out the recall order from his pocket: "I have been recalled. It is probably demotion or worse. Those guys are such a bother! But what can I do. Officially they are..." He watched in surprise as ZiChuan Xiu emptied the garbage can filled with paperwork. Every one of those was the exact same recall order he had received.

"You... you... this is blasphemy..."

"Dude, time is money! My business is booming. I don't have time to talk to those monkeys! But don't worry. I already hired a platoon of lawyers to attend the hearings for me!"

Stirling smiled: “So you are a big shot now eh? I heard your business has been going well. Can you do me a favour?”

“No problem! We are families!” ZiChuan Xiu expressed his generosity: “If you want to borrow money, just tell me how much you need, no questions asked!”

Stirling shook his head: “Not to borrow. Those idiots in the Capital are giving me headaches. We are running out of food! I want to buy a million kilo rice from you.”

“Done!” ZiChuan Xiu’s eyes instantly shined with greed: “With the military surplus as base price, plus ten percent. Twenty percent upfront; I guarantee delivery within fifteen days. For every day of delay, you are entitled to half percent of the contracted amount in liquidated damages. Full payment must be made within ten days of delivery. Or you will also be liable to pay half percent for every day of extension. Would you like to pay cash or cheque?”

Feeling confused, Stirling admitted honestly: “I have no clue about this kind of things.”

“Hoho, that is even better! Err, I mean it is all right, I know what I am talking about! Come, did you bring any cheque on you? Let’s make the down payment first, and sign your name here. Basically it means you understand and agree to all the terms of this contract, and sign your name here also. Right, just write Central Army Commander – Stirling! Good, and the date! Very good!”

Still perplexed, Stirling let ZiChuan Xiu talk him into signing his name.

ZiChuan Xiu blew over the ink in satisfaction: “Stirling, you should have put me in charge of the provisioning from the very beginning! Didn’t Ming Hui tell you? I have been supplying his entire army, and I’m doing a much better job than the Logistic Department. The Black Banner Army has been getting way better food than you guys have at the Central Army! Besides, the Logistic Department has their hands full with the Council right now, they don’t have time at all to worry about you... Hey, why are you looking at me like that? I’m not scamming your or anything? We are families, I would never!”

ZiChuan Xiu quickly tucked away the contracts, not letting Stirling see. He changed the subject: “So what is going on at the frontline?”

Stirling sighed: “Peace! We have just lost the last chance to end the civil war in the Far East! The Rebel Army already took the bait, and was lured into the open plains. Outside of the forest, they are no match for our lancers! Just when we were about to close the encirclement, the message came from the Elders, ordering us to stand down, and not to attack! So we have no choice but to watch the bulk of the Rebel Army slip away right under our noses! Terrible luck! Those were the elite of the Rebel Forces! If we destroy them, the rebellion would have ended! We were this close!”

ZiChuan Xiu could sense the underlying tone of disappointment and pain in Stirling’s voices. Just the thought of the amount of hard work Stirling had to put in every day and night, the amount of times he had risked his life in the field of battle, because one short message on a piece of paper, everything was for naught. He didn’t know what words will bring Stirling a little bit of comfort. Both of them remained silent.

In the end, it was Stirling who broke silence: “Anything new happening in the Capital? I haven’t even read a newspaper since I left. Like you said, I’m outdated.”

“Same old same old. Headmaster saying: ‘Keep up the good work!’ while Di Lin and Luo Ming Hai trying to tear each other to pieces. Here, have a look at what they are telling the council.”

ZiChuan Xiu handed him a newspaper: “Luo Ming Hai proposes that we should grant mercy to the Far Eastern Rebels in the name of the House, and welcome them back to the fold. Di Lin immediately refuted, saying: ‘Showing mercy as the Victor is an honorable act, but showing mercy as the loser, will only get ridiculed!’”

Stirling took a few glances at the article, asking slightly baffled: “But we didn’t lose?”

“Di Lin is saying that after the few loses we suffered, before and including the disaster at Red Lake, House ZiChuan has basically lost all its pride and credibility. If we offer them amnesty now because we can’t beat them, we will only become a laughing stock. The nobles of the Far Eastern Faction greatly favour his point of view. They advocate for severe punishment for the rebels in order to set an

example and uphold the dignity of the nobles! However, the nobles coming from the core regions of the House wanted the war to end, to reduce the pressure of the military expenses. Luo Ming Hai is the spokesman for the faction favouring peace. So both factions have been arguing nonstop. Di Lin accused Luo Ming Hai being an agent for the Rebels, and traitor to the House! Things almost got violent during the Assembly.”

Stirling frowned: “Di Lin shouldn’t have done that. It doesn’t matter whether it is war or peace. They are both doing what they think is best for the House. They simply have chosen a different route.

ZiChuan Xiu secretly laughed at Stirling’s naiveté: When did they start thinking what is best for the House? The only reason Luo Ming Hai advocated for peace was because Di Lin advocated for war. If Di Lin changed his mind tomorrow, saying: “Let’s have peace!” Luo Ming Hai would definitely say: “No! In order to protect House ZiChuan’s honour, we must fight till the bitter end!”

“Never mind them. Stirling, what do you think after reading all that?”

Stirling smiled: “That is not something a soldier should worry about. We have politicians for that. All we need to do is to wait, wait for either the Council of the Headmaster to give us the next order. If they say war, we fight; if they say peace, we retreat. Obedience is the first duty of a soldier.”

Stirling pondered a bit, then added: “If an army starts having a mind of its own, then it will place itself above the society, and become a danger to all.”

ZiChuan Xiu considered Stirling’s every word, and smiled: “There you go again! I’m not asking the opinion from the Central Army Commander – Stirling. I just want to know what my good friend, Stirling thinks about the situation.”

Stirling thought for a long while, finally saying: “I don’t understand politics. I’m also not interested in their honour or dignity. The current situation is, there are two major political parties with conflicting interests, and they both have powerful military backing. I don’t really believe peace can be achieved through negotiations alone. Even if it can, it will only be a false peace, impossible to last. In the end, the outcome has to be decided through trial of strength on the field of battle. It may sound very contradictory, but I believe, true peace can only be obtained through war. None of us wish to see bloodshed or brothers killing

brothers, but in order to unite the Far East, and for House ZiChuan to become strong, it is a price we must pay.”

ZiChuan Xiu was in awe. He never thought Stirling would have such deep insight considering how little free time he had while fighting on the frontline.

“Xiu, what do you think?”

ZiChuan Xiu replied: “I understand where you are coming from, but unlike you two, even though I’m born in Di Du, I grew up here. The Far East is like a second home for me. Back then, I saw with my own eyes how the human nobles mercilessly oppressed and harassed the other races, and now, I watched again how the oppressed mercilessly repaid their oppressors. No matter who wins, this is a terrible tragedy of brothers fighting brothers. If this war continues, there won’t be a victor, there will only be two losers. If the Council of Elders can resolve the conflict without needing further bloodshed, then they have my full support. But I’m only saying this to you, or they will call me a traitor again!”

Stirling listened attentively, smiling: “As I said, I don’t care whether you support war or peace. We are both doing what we think is best for the House; we are just walking different paths. I won’t fight you over something like that. However, you need to watch out for what you say to Di Lin. Our big brother has a serious temper.”

“I know! Right, almost forgot. Both Li Qing and Ka Dan told me to deliver their letters. Hold on, let me find it...” ZiChuan Xiu had to look for them everywhere; he finally found the two letters in the pile of toilet paper: “Here, I’ve done my part!”

Stirling’s hand shook with excitement as he received Ka Dan’s letter from him. He respectfully gave the enveloped a kiss, then tore it open. Before he started reading, he kissed the letter once more, but that suddenly got him thinking: Why is there water stain on the pages?! He knew ZiChuan Xiu’s bad habits all too well. He quickly caught him by the arm, asking: “Give me the truth! Did you read it? What is with the water stain?”

ZiChuan Xiu knew if he said even one word wrong, he would instantly be cut to pieces. He answered fearfully: “They are tears! Princess Ka Dan misses you so much; the tears show how much she misses you! Did you know how sad she was



the day you left?! She was crying the whole time when she wrote you this letter. That is how the pages were soaked with her lucid tears.”

“I see!” Sounding relieved, Stirling began reading the letter:

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Dear Stirling:

This is my first time writing a letter in Human’s language. please forgive me if I made any mistakes.

How have you been? The days are much colder in the Far East, please take care of yourself. I have been doing well; there is no need to worry. Lady Ning has been taking good care of me. Yesterday I went to visit a temple. Everyone tells me that the Gods there always keep the soldiers safe. Lady Ning told me that she used to go there all the time, to pray for Sir ZiChuan Xiu, asking the Gods to keep him safe. It worked every time. Sir ZiChuan Xiu really did return to her safely!

So here I am, praying for you, like the way Lady Ning prayed for Sir ZiChuan Xiu, hoping for you swift and safe return. I hope my prayer would reach the Gods like Lady Ning’s prayer did; I hope the Gods would keep you safe like they kept Sir ZiChuan Xiu safe. In my opinion, if a terrible person like Sir ZiChuan Xiu could receive the blessing of the Gods, then a wonderful person like you should have no trouble asking for Gods' mercy...

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While Stirling lost himself reading the letter, ZiChuan Xiu tried to sneak out of the room, but he only got to take two steps before Stirling’s razor sharp sabre found its way to his neck. ZiChuan Xiu made a dry laughter, then hastily returned to his seat. He couldn’t for the life of him figure out how Stirling was about to see him without shifting his eyes away from the letter.

Exhaling deeply, Stirling had finished reading Ka Dan’s letter. His sharp gaze eyed ZiChuan Xiu up and down, judging him, as if he could see through his soul: “Did you really not sneak a peek?”

“I really have not!”

“Why is there a cut on the envelope?”

“Rats!”

“Why is it so neatly cut if it were rats?”

“Because it was a rat with golden teeth!”

“Why are there so many black finger prints on the letter? And what is this? The dark brown stuff?”

Just when ZiChuan Xiu was about to run out of answers, a conversation between Luo Jie and Chang Chuan came from the outside.

Luo Jie spoke in a high-pitched voice: “The days are much colder in the Far East, please take care of yourself!”

Chang Chuan pretended to speak like a girl: “Luo Jie, I am praying for you! if a terrible person like Sir ZiChuan Xiu could receive the blessing of the Gods, then a wonderful person like you, Luo Jie should have no trouble going to hell...”

Luo Jie yelled: “Sir Stirling. I have a secret to share! The reason behind the brownish water stain on your letter: One day, when Sir Xiu was going to the outhouse, he ran out of newspapers to read. So he took your letter. He was laughing so hard while reading it, that he lost control and dropped the letter. It wasn’t easy fishing it back up, I tell you...”

He didn’t need to go on, as earth-shattering sound of a deadly struggle and ZiChuan Xiu’s desperate cries for help erupted from inside the room: “Help! Someone help! Luo Jie, you bastard! Help me!”

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Bidding ZiChuan Xiu farewell, Stirling rode day and night, nonstop, to get back to Di Du. Not sure why, but he arrived much earlier than the deadline given by the Council. Since the Assembly was still going on, almost all of Nation's nobles had come to Di Du to watch. The closer the road was to the Capital, the more crowded it became. Some of the chokepoints, Stirling had to flash his Central Army Commander badge to get through. He never expected, but he had become the most famous General of House ZiChuan, and the center of attention. No matter how hard he tried to conceal his identity, the news his return had spread to the Capital faster than he had arrived.

"Ning!" Ka Dan dashed through the door like the wind; her cheeks were flushed from the exertion: "I heard the news on my way home! Did you hear? Stirling is coming back! He is coming back! The whole city is talking about it, everyone is talking about it, he is back! He is back! What do I do? He will be back soon!" The excitement made her words jumble.

In that moment, she was stunned: The guest standing in the room turned towards her. It was Stirling! The couple stared at each other; all the joy and passion hanged in the air, leaving no room for words.

He had changed so much! It had only been a couple of months, but he had aged so much! The searing sunlight of the Far East had covered him in a layer of rugged tan. His young and handsome face was now scarred by the passing of age, and the hair around his temples now laced with grey... making him look aged and worn. He was only twenty-five years old.

Ka Dan felt the sudden rush of gentle tenderness as tears burst out of her. Her beloved, with whom she couldn't bear to part, had now become the staunch protector of the realm, a hero in everyone's eyes. Even so, she only had one wish for him, hoping for his safe return. Gods, you finally heard my prayers. She got hold of herself and gave Stirling a deep bow: "I have missed you, Stirling! You look even more handsome than before!"

Stirling returned the same solemn bow: "Your Highness, may you stay forever young, and your beauty forever blossom like this bouquet of flower!" With both of his hands, he presented her the bouquet of fiery red rose; his eyes filled with infinite gentleness and love.

Ka Dan could no longer hold herself back. She accepted the flowers and a flood tears drowned her cheeks, but she still managed to finish her sentence: "The flower will wither, a face will age. In all things, only courage is eternal. You have boundless courage, you are the most beautiful!"

ZiChuan Ning watched silently on the side. Seeing the loving couple finally reuniting in front of her, she was truly happy for them, but she still managed to find humour in the situation: The couple clearly loved each other to death, yet they had to pretend to have a serious conversation. What a dishonest couple.

She was curious as to what happened next, but Stirling's sharp gazes and Ka

Dan's sparkling eyes both fixated in her direction. Their gazes were so gentle, yet so determined, as if they were telling her: Lady Ning was no doubt the most beautiful, loving woman in the world, but if only she can make herself useful and give us the room, she would be the greatest there ever was!

"Hihi." ZiChuan Ning laughed dryly, taking a step closer to the door.

Stirling and Ka Dan continued to stare at her in silence. Their eyes had betrayed them. Their minds were filled with endless thoughts.

"Hihihi!" ZiChuan Ning barely walked out the door, and to her surprise, the door had closed shut behind her without her noticing. The last thing she saw through the gap was: Ka Dan leapt into Stirling's powerful arm, holding each other tightly.

"Ka Dan has found her happiness." ZiChuan Ning quietly concluded: "Stirling has all the good traits one could wish for in a man. He is upright, courageous, gentle, faithful and he has the whole world ahead of him. A man like that deserves all the love Ka Dan can give."

She suddenly felt incredibly lost: If so, why would someone fall in love with a dishonest, cowardly, callous and unreliable man with no prospects to speak of?

Over the blue sky, towards east, all the way to the distant land of the Far East, to the place where her beloved warrior was fighting. I miss you, Xiu. Can you feel it from over there?

# Purple River - Chapter 8.1

## Chapter 08 Part 01 – Happiness

Imperial Calendar, Year 779, December 10th, the Council of Elders erupted into applause when Central Army Commander – Stirling and Headmaster - ZiChuan Shen Xing entered the Assembly Hall. Everyone stood on their feet and welcomed their arrival. The storm of applause lasted for several minutes, then followed by waves of cheering: “Compliments for our invincible general!”

“Long live Stirling!” Thousands of gazes were focussed on one man. Everyone came forward to shake his hand; it didn’t matter whether they knew him or not.

The Speaker of the Council, Xiao Ping spoke: “Sir Stirling, please step up to the podium! So everyone can see you! Everyone wants to hear from you!”

Being on the receiving end of such warm welcome made Stirling feel uneasy. He came here together with the Headmaster, but he ended up being the center of the attention, all the while Headmaster was being neglected. How would that make ZiChuan Shen Xing feel? Besides, there were two other higher ranking officers here as well, the Supreme Commander – Luo Ming Hai and the Inspector General – Di Lin. It would be rude if he addressed the council before them.

ZiChuan Shen Xing seemed to have detected what was troubling Stirling, he smiled to him: “Go ahead. It is not just for you. You are here on behalf of the hundreds of thousands soldiers fighting on the Far Eastern Front. You are doing this for them. You should be proud.”

Seeing all the eager faces looking his way and shouting: “Get up there! Stirling!” he gave in. Feeling slightly embarrassed, he apologized to ZiChuan Shen Xing: “Sir, pardon my manners.”

ZiChuan Shen Xing patted his shoulder with a smile, giving him encouragement.

Stirling walked up the podium, and thunderous applause resounded in the Assembly Hall. Stirling humbly lowered his head. When the applause started to die down a little, he gestured with his hand, hinting that he was about to speak. Instantly, the applause died away, leaving only Stirling's clear voice echoing in the Great Hall: "I'm very grateful, for the invitation to attend the Council of Elders. Thank you all for giving me this opportunity!" (Another wave of applause)

"Just now, I received an incredibly warm welcome from the Council. I have to thank everyone again. I'm truly honored. However, the Council is holding me at too high of esteem. I'm but a soldier. I do not deserve such honour. If there is anything I have done, it was only possible thanks to Headmaster – ZiChuan Shen Xing's infinite wisdom, Supreme Commander – Luo Ming Hai's strategies and the sacrifices made by the brave soldiers fighting on the frontline. While for me, I merely didn't make any noticeable mistakes. I'm not worthy of such praise."

"The sky above House ZiChuan is still enveloped in a cloak of darkness. What choices do we make? War or peace? Live or die? Everything depends on the decisions you make here. You hold the future of House ZiChuan in your hands!" Therefore it is of utmost importance that we work together and make the right decision, for ZiChuan, and for the millions of people supporting us, trusting us!

"As for me, I can only say that, the army will always remain loyal to the House! It has always been, it is now, and always will be! I promise you, we'll be ready to carry out your next order! No matter what the Council decides in the end, whether it is war or peace, we will carry it out without fail! Our army will forever be the most loyal blade in the hands of ZiChuan. We will always be ready to defend the House in times of need and spill the blood of our enemies on the field of battle!"

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Stirling's short speech had ended, but the applause and cheers continued for a long time.

Stirling wanted to step down, but the applause retained him, making him feel obliged to stay and pay tribute to the crowd. He was modest, but also proud: As

a soldier, could there be an even more glorious moment than this?

While everyone cheered passionately, Luo Ming Hai watched apathetically on the side. Stirling gave him a simple nod, showing respect. Luo Ming Hai nodded back with such stiffness in his neck, it was as if he had twisted it this morning. Stirling chuckled slightly, knowing Luo Ming Hai was probably not happy about any of this. He shifted his gaze again, and found Inspector General – Di Lin.

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Di Lin smiled back at him, holding up his thumb in approval. Di Lin was truly glad for Stirling. Not only because Stirling was his good brother, but also because Stirling's success would make Luo Ming Hai suffer. In this mind: Out of the three Generals currently in command of a large army, he already blackmailed Fang Jin to side with him. Now with the rise of Stirling, Luo Ming Hai only had Ming Hui left on his side, not to mention Ming Hui was known for being an unreliable coward. Of course, given Stirling's gentle nature, he would not want to actively take part in his political struggle against Luo Ming Hai, but at the very least, Stirling would remain neutral. If the situation did escalate in the future, and Stirling was forced to make a choice, Di Lin was certain that he would choose his.

Who would have thought, that he had somehow gained the upper hand in the Army?

An idea popped into his head: Why don't I help Stirling take the position of Supreme Commander from Luo Ming Hai? It is not impossible. Stirling has the reputation, the accomplishments to back it up and the support of the army, the council and the people. He even has Headmaster's favour... If he succeeds, I would have dealt a fatal blow to Luo Ming Hai.

Something else suddenly caught his attention. He chuckled, thinking: "So Stirling has mastered the art of political speech as well! That was such an eloquent and passionate speech, yet he didn't really say anything of importance. Was he advocating for war or for peace? He managed to avoid the question entirely, not offending either side. When did he become so masterful? Who taught him?"

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The night dawned and today's assembly came to an end. Stirling and Di Lin

hastily left the hall, feeling relieved.

Gesturing for their escorts to leave, the duo walked casually side by side in the late autumn streets of Di Du.

Stirling exhaled: "It's finally over!"

Di Lin smiled: "Yes, for now. There is more tomorrow. Patience, brother. I thought you were about to lose it back there. I could hear your knuckles cracking from miles away."

Stirling laughed: "Was I? I must be looking really scary then. Those elders from the province of Locke were physically shaking. But honestly, they were getting on my nerves when they started questioning me about every little detail written in Logistic Department's ledger. I remember one asking me: 'Look, it says here, the Logistic Department has supplied the Central Army with fifty thousand bundles of arrows in September. Where are they now?' I told him: 'we used them to shoot rebels.' And he asked me with a straight face: 'Where, when, and who did you shoot? What were their names? Where did the arrows hit them? Were there medic reports? No? You don't have any of the evidence. How can you proof you didn't steal them for your own gain?'"

That was when I started shouting back: "How can I possibly ask those dead rebels for their names? What is the point of stealing fifty thousand bundles of arrows? I can't even use them as firewood."

Di Lin laughed: "More patience. Haven't you heard? There is a way to tell when a genius has been born into this world: All the idiots would band together and attack him. They don't really have anything against you per se. It is simply what happens when you are the Champion of the war favouring faction. The peace favouring faction wants to hurt the war favouring faction by hurting you, and you are letting them win by getting angry."

Stirling had calmed down a little: "I get it now, but what does the council want? War or peace? I don't care which, but they need to make up their mind quick! Several hundred thousand soldiers are waiting on their decision. The daily expense alone is costing almost a hundred million!"

Di Lin shook his head: "As you know, the Council has always been divided into two opposing camps, the Far Eastern Faction and the Core Region Faction.



Normally, the nobles from the Far Eastern Faction hold the majority, but many of them died during the recent rebellion in the Far East. Most of their territory and wealth vanished along with them, which greatly affected their hold over the council. As a result, many of the nobles from the core region have been trying to snatch the vacant positions in the council, hoping to gain the majority. Naturally, the Far Eastern Faction is fighting back, and thus we have a stalemate! The whole situation regarding war or peace is in fact a battle for control between those two factions!” What Di Lin didn’t mention was that, it was also an important battle between him and Luo Ming Hai.

Stirling seemed to understand, asking: “Why don’t they just call for a vote? They would know the answer within an afternoon!”

Di Lin smiled: “A political warfare is no different than a real battle. Both require tactics and strategies. Calling for a vote is like entering a battle to the death! Imagine if you are in a situation where you are facing an equally powerful enemy, will you deploy your entire army in an all out battle?”

Stirling shook his head: “I won’t. I will wait, until either the enemy shows its weakness or my reinforcement arrives. At the same time I will send out skirmish parties to distract my enemy, then hit him on the flank. Once I’m certain I have the absolute advantage that is the moment I will deploy the bulk of my army for a decisive battle.”

Di Lin nodded: “It is the same here. Both factions are trying to avoid a frontal confrontation; they are both waiting for reinforcements. Meanwhile, they are trying to win over the elders who haven’t chosen a side yet, or bribe the elders from the opposing faction; just like how you would exploit an enemy’s weakness. The whole investigation into you is basically their way of attacking the flank of the war favouring faction. Once one side is convinced that it has the absolute majority that is when it will call for a vote.”

Stirling finally understood, lamenting: “Hundreds of thousand lives, billions in military expenses, who would have thought, everything happened because of something so petty!” There was something else Stirling didn’t say: No wonder, even though we have the most powerful army on the continent, several generations of brave and wise Headmasters, and countless capable generals, towards west, we can’t defeat House Liu Feng, towards east, we can’t push back

the Demons. House ZiChuan's territory has not changed since the third Headmaster.

He looked towards Di Lin: "Brother, I have another question for you, but I'm not sure..." He hesitated.

Di Lin halted his steps, turning around towards him. The duo looked each other in the eyes; Di Lin's gaze was so crystal clear: "You want to ask me why I advocate for war? Am I like those elders? Do I also have some ulterior motive?"

Stirling admitted honestly: "Yes." Then protested: "But, I didn't say anything about having an ulterior motive, you said that yourself!"

Di Lin laughed: "You can't even be honest with your own brother. That makes me sad."

His tone turned serious again: "The reason I'm advocating for war is because the rebels are not being sincere. They say they wanted peace, and everything was forgiven, but they wouldn't give us a straight answer regarding any of the important questions. For example, we demanded that they hand over the traitor Lei Hong, but they kept telling us they don't know where he is; we told them to stop harassing our supply line, they said it wasn't their problem, and the allied army of all races was not responsible for the wrongdoings of the bandits, which was clearly a lie, since most of the bandits were part of the Rebel Army before they became bandits."

"When we asked them: 'since our army are holding their current position, shouldn't the Rebel Army show their good faith and remain where they are as well?' They gave us the excuse that their soldiers needed to return home to help with the harvest... I'm quite certain once they disband the army and send them home to every villages in the Far East, while we are still waiting here like idiots, they will already be busy recruiting and mobilizing more manpower to fight us again next year."

"They were also saying that they wanted to create a peaceful paradise in the Far East for both the Humans and the non-Humans, but no one knew how. Who will be in charge? Will they recognize House ZiChuan's authority? Do they still belong to House ZiChuan? They won't give us answer to any of those questions, and therefore I don't think they are being sincere at all."

“In other words, the rebel’s goal for the peace talk is very obvious: They know the winter is coming, all the rivers in the Far Eastern Regions will most likely be frozen; digging trenches will be much harder. Their army is useless once they come out into the open. No matter how many men they may have, they are no match for our lancers. Their goal is to buy time, waiting for the spring to come, when the rain will soften the earth. By then our heavy cavalries will no longer reign supreme. Our hooves will get stuck in the mud like lambs waiting to be slaughtered.”

“Against a group of aggressive races like theirs, where anyone could become a soldier at a moment’s notice, killing several hundred thousand wouldn’t even tickle them. As long as they are willing, they can easily come up with several millions more. After the peace talk, we will only grow weaker. When they come at us again next year with an even larger army, and besiege Fort Warren. How are we going to stop them then?”

The words sent chill down Stirling’s spine, he asked: “So that is the first reason, what is the second?”

Di Lin continued arrogantly: “Committing treason is the worst crime of all. They cannot be forgiven! Yes, the Far Eastern Nobles may have been too cruel; they may also have been too greedy, but we must let everyone know: no matter the reason or cause, rebelling against House ZiChuan means only one thing – death! If we spare the Far Eastern Rebels today, tomorrow we will be facing the second, the third and the hundredth Far Eastern Rebellion, and soon House ZiChuan is going to crumble like the Empire of Light did, hundreds of years ago!”

Stirling shook his head: “The Far Eastern population is in the tens of millions, killing them all is impossible.”

“It is impossible. In the end we’ll have to spare some of them, but that must come after we have obtained the victory. As the victor, we can be merciful. We can show them the benevolence and kindness of House ZiChuan, and that will not tarnish the House’s honour. However, if we rush to negotiate peace given our current situation, we can forget any of that. We will only be seen as laughing stocks. The whole world will know how weak we are. We are only going to bring an even bigger disaster upon ourselves!”

“Stirling, you have the power. The elders respect you. Your words hold weight. When the time comes, you have to side with me. This is for the future of House ZiChuan! Luo Ming Hai’s appeasement policies won’t work.”

Stirling had already decided to remain neutral, but after hearing Di Lin’s earnest plea, and well-thought-out reasoning, he wasn’t sure anymore. He pondered for a while, finally saying: “Ok. If I have no choice but to choose a side, I will side with you.”

His promise wasn’t much of a promise, but it was good enough for Di Lin. He knew Stirling’s character. Once he made a promise, he would never break it, and that was simply the best he could do for the time being, which worked out in Di Lin’s favour.

While the conversation continued, they had arrived at a crossroad.

Feeling relaxed, Di Lin halted his steps and asked: “How about it? Want to pay your sister-in-law a visit? She kept asking me about you and Xiu, how have you guys been in the Far East? So, are you hungry? Do you want to try her cooking?”

If it was any other day, Stirling would have jumped on the opportunity, but today he kindly declined: “Another time perhaps. I’ve an appointment.”

Even Di Lin was surprised when Stirling declined his invitation. He looked him up and down, then burst out in laughter: “I see. When the moon mounted to the tops of the willows, two lovers kept their tryst after the yellow dusk.<sup>[1]</sup> I was wondering, what is with that smile on your face the whole time. I get it now: The spring is in the air, and the absence makes the heart grow fonder. I must be getting in the way!”

Stirling’s cheeks flushed red, still trying to deny: “What are you talking about. It is nothing like that.”

“Fine, I won’t pry, but...” Di Lin came closer with a very serious look on his face: “As an older brother, it is my responsibility to warn you.”

“Oh? What?”

“Be careful with the manual labor; don’t overexert yourself, or it could become problematic if you are too tired to mount the horse when you are ordered to return to the Far East!” Di Lin spoke every word with a frown, as if he was really

worried.

It took a while before Stirling realized what he meant. By the time he went after him with his fist, Di Lin was long gone, leaving behind only one short sentence: "When you have time, come around to my place with Li Qing and have a dinner with your sister-in-law. We are families; there is nothing to be embarrassed about."

Watching Di Lin's shadows slowly disappearing in the distance, a dark cloud of worries floated above him: "Li Qing! Right, I almost forgot. I still have a virtuous fiancé at home. What should I do?!"

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Soon, Stirling arrived at the promised pavilion in the park. After seeing Ka Dan's elegant shadow, all his worries and unhappiness instantly vanished. In order to avoid any unwanted attention, Ka Dan had donned her scarf and veil. In the early winter, her appearance did not seem too out of place. Stirling approached her from behind, wrapping his arms around her tightly.

Ka Dan jumped from the sudden touch. Seeing it was Stirling, she put her hand in front of his chest, saying: "You really scared me." Her scare was quickly replaced by a smile, a smile that made his heart skip a beat. Just as he was about to kiss her beautiful lips...

"Warning, the following content contains scenes of a sexual nature, parental guidance is advised for viewers under the age of eighteen."

ZiChuan Ning's voice rang out from behind. She sat on the wooden railing of the pavilion, swinging her feet lazily with her neck extended, watching the couple get intimate. She called out in an indolent voice, "Please do continue, pretend I'm not here." Stirling was too focused on Ka Dan; somehow, he didn't notice her there at all.

Stirling was greatly disappointed. He let go of Ka Dan and looked at her questioningly: Why did you bring that rascal?

Ka Dan's cheeks flushed in embarrassment, whispering: "I didn't know the way."

Stirling sighed in defeat. The only reason he and Ka Dan agreed to meet

outside was to avoid having ZiChuan Ning around. Her annoying nature came directly from ZiChuan Xiu. In the end, he still couldn't get rid of her.

"I'm sorry. I was late. Do you have to wait for long?" Stirling held Ka Dan's cold hands close to heart, asking with concern.

Ka Dan shook her head slightly: "Not long."

"Liar!" ZiChuan Ning interrupted angrily: "He was late for over an hour! I counted, on average I'm getting bitten by a mosquito every ten minute. Look, one, two... there are eight of them in total!"

Stirling didn't bother to look, and continued to ask: "Are you hungry?"

Ka Dan shook her head again: "I'm not."

"I am!" ZiChuan Ning hurriedly added, but they both ignored her.

Stirling asked: "Are you thirsty?"

Ka Dan shook her head out of habit, then finally nodded: "Just a little."

Naturally, ZiChuan Ning wouldn't wish to be left out: "I'm thirsty as well."

Stirling faked a smile worthy of an elder from the Council: "How about it, Lady Ning. Are you thirsty? Here, take my money and go get yourself something nice!"

Stirling grabbed a bill worth thousand and said: "Here, keep the change!"

ZiChuan Ning: "But the drink I want is very expensive!"

Stirling added another thousand: "Fine, here. Don't worry about it!"

ZiChuan Ning: "I heard it is made of something very special!"

Stirling added another thousand.

ZiChuan Ning: "What about the money for the tissues?!"

Stirling reached for his wallet again.

"How am I supposed to go home on my own?"

Stirling wanted to pay, but his wallet was already empty. He sighed: "Ning, what do you want? There is a limit to how much you can extort, ok?"

ZiChuan Ning showed her sweet and loving smile: "Don't be like that! I just

don't want to see you make the mistake that is all. You know how the young couples are like. Remember, don't pluck the forbidden fruit before it is ripe!"

Stirling muttered softly: "But I already did, so what else do you want?"

Ka Dan's cheeks turned purple as she kicked him hard from under the table.

ZiChuan Ning uttered in surprise: "What?!"

Stirling instantly corrected: "I mean, of course not. You have nothing to worry about!"

Seeing he couldn't get rid of the rascal through conventional means, Stirling showed his trump card: "Right, someone wanted me to deliver a message to you from the Far East. Hold on, don't get too excited yet. So what did he say again? It sounded important. Damn, my memories have been failing lately. I can't seem to recall. How unfortunate, but fear not, if I could just get some alone time I'm sure I will start to remember again."

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Ka Dan laughed until she could barely stand straight: "That was so mean. How did you come up with something like that?! The moment you mentioned Sir ZiChuan Xiu, she instantly melted! But, did Sir Xiu really tell you to deliver the message?"

Stirling reminisced the day he spoke to ZiChuan Xiu in the Far East, and he did ask him whether he had anything he wanted to tell Lady Ning. ZiChuan Xiu was silent for a long time before he answered: "If she asks about it, tell her that you never saw me."

What happened between those two, he wondered. Stirling shook his head: "Nope. I haven't seen him at all, but don't tell Lady Ning that. Or this trick won't work again. So, did something happen between those two?"

Ka Dan gave him a look, her expression unreadable. Stirling asked curiously: "Did I say something wrong?"

"Stirling, you just lied! If you haven't seen Sir Xiu, then you wouldn't have noticed the strangeness between them, and you wouldn't have asked that question. Is it possible that you have seen him and he told you to not tell anyone

that you did?”

Stirling was shocked. He never expected that Ka Dan would uncover his lies from a single small slip-up, and figure out the truth all by herself. Out of all the people he had met, in term of reaction speed and critical thinking, Di Lin had always been the number one. But now, perhaps even he was no match to the Demon Princess – Ka Dan!

A thought came to him: Luckily we have captured her. If she is still with the Demons and is entrusted with important tasks, she could very easily turn out to be another powerful enemy like Liu Feng Shuang! If all the Demon Commanders are as clever as she is, then the Far Eastern Army will be in serious trouble. No matter what, we can't return her to the Demons.

He suddenly realized how ridiculous his thoughts sounded: Ka Dan loves him; she would never be his enemy.

Seeing the unsteady look on Stirling's face, she hastily added: "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have accused you. Are you angry with me?"

Stirling exhaled deeply, purging all the unnecessary thoughts from his mind. He smiled: "No. I didn't tell you the truth. I was wrong." He told her the whole story, but reminded her: "Don't say anything to Lady Ning!"

"Anyhow, can we stop talking about them? Let's talk about us. Ka Dan, you have been living with us for so long, are you getting used to living here? How are you feeling?"

Ka Dan hesitated: "I'm not sure how to say it. When I first got here, I couldn't believe my eyes. Everything is so wonderful! The weather is neither too cold nor too warm. There is an abundance of resources, providing so much comfort in life."

Stirling asked out of curiosity: "Really? What is it like being over there?" He immediately regretted asking once the words escaped his lips.

As expected, Ka Dan only shook her head, not saying a word. Stirling, you wouldn't understand. Compared to us, Humans practically live in paradise. The nature is a cruel mistress. Our lands are barren; there are deserts everywhere. Our weather is harsh, the morning is unbearably hot and the evening is



insufferably cold. Natural disasters are common occurrence for us. Earthquake, typhoon, snowstorm, sandstorm, and even the hail can destroy a year of harvest we worked so hard to protect, striking the realm with famine. Stirling, even if I told you, you still wouldn't understand. Death for us is as common as the air we breathe, the sky and the earth we see. It is always, and everywhere. My land is a place of sorrow. Death is a part of our daily life. Stirling, if you only know what it is like, then you will understand why we keep invading the Westland time and time again. We are not doing this because war is in our nature; we are only doing this because the only way for our people to survive is to take the food and rich soils from the Humans! Humans are so fortunate! Why do they not need to bleed, or die to have such gentle weather, clear sky and flowers in full bloom? And I, soon to be living as a Human, will get to share all of these with my beloved. Why can't I forget the darkness in the sky, the endless desert and my father? My heart aches! My home...

Ka Dan's eyes were brimming with tears. Stirling could feel her pain as he tried to comfort her: "Don't worry. Once we pacify the Far East, I will take you home to see your family."

"But then, I won't be able to see you again. I will be even sadder."

Stirling smiled: "How so? Didn't we promise to never leave each other? I will go with you."

Ka Dan stared eyes wide: "Impossible. My Father and Brothers will kill you! They are always saying the Highborn and the Humans cannot coexist!"

That had him startled: He almost forgot the father of his beloved was the current invincible Demon God King!

Ka Dan comforted him back: "Besides, it has been so long since I was captured. My families probably think I'm already dead. Let's keep it that way. They will be sad, but the sadness will eventually pass. I have also gotten used to the life here."

Stirling was deeply touched. The girl standing in front him was willing to give up her majestic stature as the princess, give up her families and her home in order to be with him. Where else would he find a truer love than that? In his gentle voice, he told her: "Don't worry. This life, I'm yours. I vow to always love

you and honor you for all the days of my life! If I break my vow, let me die with a thousand arrows through my heart!”

Ka Dan hurriedly put her finger against his lips, not letting him speak. Their eyes were filled with joy, and their hands intertwined, sharing each other’s warmth. However, Ka Dan’s face revealed a hint of worry. Stirling immediately asked: “Is something wrong? Aren’t you happy?”

“No. I just thought, I’m a Demon princess, while you are a high ranking officer of House ZiChuan. If you marry me, it may affect your future...”

Stirling smiled: “I don’t think that is going to be a problem. The Headmaster has always been kind to me. I’m certain he will allow it if I asked him.”

“What if he doesn’t?”

“Then I will resign.” Stirling replied without hesitation; his voice was unequivocally clear.

“It is not much, but after all these years, I have managed to save up a small amount, enough for us to open a bakery somewhere. And I will be the Master Baker... I guess I haven’t told you. I’m quite a baker! And you can be the Madam, handling the customers. Since you are so beautiful, I’m sure we will have many customers...” Stirling looked at her as he spoke with a shade of regret in his voice: “Just that, you deserve better.”

Ka Dan kissed him softly, whispering with flushed cheeks: “What are you saying? I’m not pretty at all, and I’m very clumsy, I hope I don’t scare the customers away.”

“A peaceful life without violence, intrigue and worries, would you like that?”

Ka Dan put up a serious look: “Let me think about it... Hmm, what if we start hiring pretty waitresses later? Will you flirt with them? Master Baker Stirling?”

Holding up his chin, Stirling pretended to be give the matter a serious thought: “Let me think about it too... How pretty are we talking about? Madam Baker Ka Dan?”

“You are done for! You better not let me catch you!”

“Hahaha...”

The loving couple immersed themselves into the sweetness of each other. They never noticed the pair of gloomy eyes watching them from behind the bushes in the distance.

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While reading the scout's report, Luo Ming Hai slammed on his desk, instructing: "I don't care what you do or how much it cost, I want to know everything there is to know about that girl!"

The next day, a report containing Ka Dan's birth, background and her involvement with Stirling was delivered to Luo Ming Hai's desk. Luo Ming Hai asked coldly: "Is the information accurate?"

"Yes, Sir. We bribed one of ZiChuan Ning's servants. It cost us two-hundred-thousand, but I'm confident he won't lie to us."

Another ominous smile appeared on Luo Ming Hai's face: "This is worth every penny! I'm going to see the Headmaster now."

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After the usual daily work report, Luo Ming Hai casually mentioned the news to ZiChuan Shen Xing: "Sir, last night when I was taking my habitual stroll through the garden. I happened to run into Commander Stirling and his female companion. They were quite fond of each other!"

ZiChuan Shen Xing smiled: "How long has it been since Stirling last saw Li Qing? I suppose it is about time they get together! Hoho, it is good being young. He makes an old man like me jealous sometimes!"

"But," Luo Ming Hai added: "I don't think it was Banner Master Li Qing!"

"Oh?" ZiChuan Shen Xing seemed more interested: "Who was it?"

"I'm not sure, Sir. Would you like me to find out?"

ZiChuan Shen Xing pondered for a while, then spoke slowly: "Very well, it doesn't hurt to know." Even though he sounded uninterested, they both knew, he did not take the decision lightly.

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In less than two hours, Luo Ming Hai had "finished" his investigation. ZiChuan Shen Xing listened to his report in silence, then responded calmly: "I see. I don't suppose it is a big deal, but it is best if we keep this to ourselves. Was there anything else?"

Luo Ming Hai looked disappointed. He didn't expect ZiChuan Shen Xing to be so unconcerned about such important finding. He never realized that the moment he had left, ZiChuan Shen Xing immediately instructed his servant: "Tell Banner Master Li Qing to come and see me at once."

After an hour of conversation with Li Qing, ZiChuan Shen Xing's visage was cold as ice, but his voice was still so gentle and kind: "Why don't you ask if Commander Stirling has time tonight, if he is willing to dine with an old man like me?"

[1]Part of the poem by Ou Yang Xiu, "The Lantern Festival".

# Purple River - Chapter 8.2

## Chapter 08 Part 02 - Showdown

Stirling arrived on time for the dinner at Headmaster's House. ZiChuan Shen Xing gave him a warm welcome as he accompanied him into the dining room. Everything was as ZiChuan Shen Xing told him, an ordinary meal. Other than himself, he didn't invite anyone else tonight, but the dinner was too extravagant for just the two of them. That got Stirling thinking, such sumptuous behaviour was quite uncharacteristic of him. As an officer of the Logistic Department, Li Qing once told Stirling half jokingly: "Our Headmaster is the most modest of all Headmasters in House ZiChuan's history." Hinting that sometimes, ZiChuan Shen Xing could be overly stingy. He would spend thirty million to arm an army without a second thought, yet, he was unwilling to pay a few extra coins to add a fish to his evening meal.

"Sir, this is too much. You didn't have to. The two of us won't be able to eat all these."

ZiChuan Shen Xing didn't seem to care: "Don't worry about that. I will finish the leftovers tomorrow." He laughed: "Come, you are guest tonight; you don't have to hold back. Be at ease, and eat all you can! The days in the Far East must have been tough on you. Have you looked in the mirrors lately? It has only been a few months but your face has darkened and aged so much."

"It's an honour to serve House ZiChuan! It is my duty as a soldier; I have only done what is required of me..."

"Didn't I tell you to be at ease? That is the only flaw of your character, you just can't let go. Tonight you are not allowed to call me Sir. Treat me as an elder

instead and call me Uncle Shen Xing. How is that?”

Stirling had been feeling uneasy since he got here, but after seeing the kind look on ZiChuan Shen Xing’s face, it was like a weight off his shoulder. He finally smiled: “Very well.”

The duo sat down at the table, and ZiChuan Shen Xing began introducing the various dishes he had prepared for tonight: “This is the Patterned Carp Fish from the western regions. They can only be caught during the few selected weeks in the year, and it is even harder to transport them to Di Du while keeping them alive...”

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After the dinner, the two sat down in the Guest Room and enjoyed the tea, during which ZiChuan Shen Xing asked with concern about the ongoing war in the Far East. He was mostly interested in knowing the morale and the combat strength of the newly recruited militia forces, since they amounted to over half of all the forces currently active in the Far East.

Stirling considered for a moment then told him the truth: “Majority of the militia forces are farmers and local aristocrats from all parts of House ZiChuan. Even though they didn’t receive much training, they are brave and they are eager. With proper encouragement, they can fight on par with any regular divisions. However, when they are under attack or when they start losing, they panic very easily.”

“A while back, a small militia force was sent to pacify a group of rebels. All it took was a few dozen Beastmen, and several thousand militias were sent fleeing in all directions. Another time late in the night inside Fang Jin’s main camp, a young soldier was having a nightmare when he shouted in his sleep: ‘Demons!’ And instantly, chaos ensued in the camp. One voice soon turned into many, shouting: ‘The Demons are here! Run for your lives!’ Everyone started to panic and run around like headless chickens in the dark, shouting “Run! Run!” Fang Jin did his best to calm everyone down, lighting torches while giving orders: ‘Stay calm! Everyone regroup at my position!’ But even his words could not stem the tide. If it wasn’t for his brave personal guards, he was probably trampled to death by now. By the time the sun came up, several hundred soldiers had been

trampled to death during the chaos. It took Fang Jin a whole week to re-gather the scattered forces. Even then a few thousand of them had gone missing. They either turned deserters or were picked off by Rebels when they were separated.”

“Currently, we have four active armies operating in the Far East. My Central Army, around hundred-thousand strong; Ming Hui’s Black Banner Army, also around hundred-thousand strong; Fang Jin’s militia forces, around two-hundred-fifty-thousand strong; finally, there is the remnant of the Far Eastern Army. After regrouping, they total about two-hundred-thousand. However they are mostly spread across the region, including Fort Warren’s, Deja’s and Iriya’s garrison forces.”

“All the active Commanders agree that, despite the numbers of Fang Jin’s forces, in term of actual combat strength, Fang Jin’s forces are the weakest because he doesn’t have a single regular division under his command. If the Rebels wish to break through our lines, they’ll definitely start with Fang Jin. Both I and Ming Hui wish to place one or two regular divisions under Fang Jin’s command, to strengthen his forces.”

ZiChuan Shen Xing listened to his every word while nodding constantly: “Indeed! Soldiers must be trained! I have already arranged for fifty thousand militia forces to be formally trained at Fort Warren!”

Stirling nodded in agreement: “That is most wise.”

ZiChuan Shen Xing quickly changed the subject: "Right, Stirling. You are not that young anymore. Have you thought about settling down?"

Stirling was shocked, answering in a hurry: "Thank you, Sir. But our lands are broken, the Far East is in turmoil, the Rebellion runs rampant and hundreds of thousand enemies have lined up against us. I am fortunate enough to be graced by Headmaster's and House ZiChuan's favour. How could I not give my all when the House is in great strife? This is neither the place nor time to consider my personal affairs."

"That is where you are wrong, Stirling." ZiChuan Shen Xing spoke very seriously: "Quelling the rebellion, defending the realm against our enemies, those are the duties of every soldier in House ZiChuan. You cannot and should not assume all the responsibility alone! Are you saying without you, we will not

be able to pacify the Far East?"

Stirling panicked, hurriedly curtsying: "Yes, Sir. I misspoke. I apologize."

ZiChuan Shen Xing gestured for him to sit, saying: "As I said, you don't have to feel responsible for everything. It is a burden that we all share! Yes, from your point of view, it is your duty to serve House ZiChuan, but as House ZiChuan, how can we let a loyal servant suffer so much in its name and ask him to sacrifice all his youth? You are telling me that it has to wait until the rebellion is quelled, but what if the negotiation fails? This war can easily go on for years. Are you really going to wait for another ten years to get married? That would be ridiculous."

Stirling argued: "But I still have many urgent businesses to attend to; my men need me in the Far East..."

"Oh, it is fine. We are still negotiating anyway. There is nothing you can do for the time being. Why don't you stay in the Capital for a few more days, get married and then go back? Of course, we may have to rush things along, but you can leave the details to me. I'll take care of everything. I promise you a wedding worthy of you!"

The Headmaster promised to arrange his wedding, which was such a rare honor. If it was any other day, Stirling would have kneeled and bowed in gratitude, but right now, his mind was a complete mess. Stirling was at a loss for words; he was stunned.

ZiChuan Shen Xing didn't seem to care for his lack of curtsy, he continued: "It's not right to keep her waiting without ever giving her an answer. Li Qing is still a lady. Do you really want her to spend her entire youth waiting around for you?"

"Stirling, war is important, but so is guaranteeing our future. Both you and Li Qing are very capable in your own right, and very loyal to ZiChuan. I'm certain that your children will be as capable and loyal as you are!"

"Good, Stirling. Since you don't have anything to add, then it is settled. Very well, I already picked the date. Two days from now is a good day. You may have a week off for honeymoon, before you have to return to the Far East."

"How much savings do you have? Do you have enough for the wedding? If not, I can help with the cost. Li Qing comes from a famous Household. We can't insult



her with too poor of a wedding."

Stirling's mind screamed in agony, but one thing had always been clear to him: Whatever happens, he must not agree to anything half-heartedly. He spoke with a strained voice: "Sir, I hope to delay the wedding."

ZiChuan Shen Xing's face instantly darkened. That was the first time Stirling had ever disobeyed his wishes: "Stirling, what are you saying? Do you think you are too good for her, and she is not worthy of you anymore?"

With the first set of words out of his mouth, Stirling had gotten much bolder: "I wouldn't dare. Lady Li Qing is noble born; she is beautiful, virtuous, kind and very capable..."

ZiChuan Shen Xing nodded: "Indeed, so what more do you want?"

"No. I just thought, given Lady Li Qing's beauty and skills, she deserves a better man than I. I am but a soldier, a lowborn. I have no wealth or properties to speak of. I do not deserve someone like her."

ZiChuan Shen Xing leapt to his feet, asking in a drawn out manner: "Stirling, do you intend to break off the engagement?" He lowered his voice, as if he was trying to suppress his anger.

Stirling gritted his teeth, answering softly: "Yes."

The moment those words left his mouth, he could feel the wave of dizziness washing over him. He steeled his mind, closed his eyes, and fortified himself against the impending rage of heaven.

To his surprise, only peace and calm came for him. ZiChuan Shen Xing's voice was unbelievably gentle: "Stirling, if you don't like Li Qing, is it possible that you have someone else in mind? You can tell me, I won't blame you."

"Sir?" Stirling was at a loss for words.

"It doesn't matter who she is. You can tell me."

"You are right, Sir. My heart belongs to someone else." Seeing the kind look on ZiChuan Shen Xing's face, Stirling gathered his courage and told him: "The one I love is Ka Dan."

ZiChuan Shen Xing raised his brow: "Ka Dan? Who is she?" Even though he

knew everything there is to know about her, he had to pretend hearing her name for the first time.

Stirling mustered up the rest of his courage and told him everything. ZiChuan Shen Xing listened attentively as he paced back and forth inside the room, not saying a word. He finally stopped in front of the window, speaking slowly: "I'm getting old."

Stirling didn't quite understand, responding instinctively: "Sir, you are not even sixty. You are still young and energetic. How can you be 'old'?"

ZiChuan Shen Xing ignored him as he went on: "In a sense, after all these years and being the Headmaster, I have seen it all and done it all. I shouldn't have any regrets, but there is just one thing I can't seem to let go."

Stirling watched him in silence. Tonight, the cunning and calculated Headmaster had laid down his mask, showing a rare sight of honesty.

"Since our founding father, the First Headmaster - ZiChuan Yun founded House ZiChuan, until my brother, who died from battle after he handed me the mantle from his deathbed, House ZiChuan's bloodline had weathered seven generations of storms of time! I cannot allow the name of 'ZiChuan' to perish under my watch! If what we built with seven generations of blood and tears ended up collapsing in my hand, I will not be able to face my brother or House ZiChuan's ancestor in the afterlife!"

"All I have done and all I have given up, everything was to ensure the future of House ZiChuan. Every sin I have committed, I will gladly face them on my own. Even if I have to suffer in the deepest halls of hell, I will have no regrets!" ZiChuan Shen Xing declared with exceptional determination, even so he could not mask the strand of regret in his voice.

Stirling had some ideas of what ZiChuan Shen Xing meant with the "sins" he had committed, yet, he felt the need to comfort him: "You are being too hard on yourself, Sir. The Far Eastern rebellion is definitely a serious matter, but it will not affect the longevity of ZiChuan, it will not threaten our survival."

"I was not talking about the Far East." ZiChuan Shen Xing's eyed him sharply while gently tapping the tea table with his fingertip: "I can predict, in the ten years after my death, House ZiChuan will be consumed by a succession war.

ZiChuan Ning is too young, and knows too little. She is also a girl, with no prestige to speak of. How can she hope to repel the overwhelming opposition and keep her subjects at bay? Seeing the lack of faith in the young ruler of the House, troubling intentions will no doubt rise in the heart of the ambitious ones. With the Imperial grip loosened, soon even the local lords and vassals would attempt to remove her from power. Just like how House ZiChuan was founded after the collapse of Empire of Light, who knows, perhaps there will be a second and a third House ZiChuan, breaking away from us and declaring independence. Think about it, by then ZiChuan Ning will have no army to call upon, no lords to rely on. As a fragile little girl, what can she do when she is surrounded by countless enemies from outside and within?”

Stirling could sense the fear in his every word. He hurriedly reassured him: “Sir, I think you are worrying too much. Yes, there may be a few with malicious intent, but I believe the vast majority of the lords and officers are still loyal to the House. I’m sure you will live a long life, but if the day does come when the heaven falls, I have no doubt that the servants of ZiChuan will love Lady Ning the same way they have always loved you, and give her their loyalty and undying respect.”

ZiChuan Shen Xing shook his head: “Stirling, you are only seeing the good in others! While I’m alive, of course they are all very loyal, but once I’m dead. Haha! I still remember, while my brother was alive, the traitor Yang Ming Hui was also a loyal servant of the House!”

ZiChuan Shen Xing’s words were spoken with wisdom. Stirling had no answers. He asked: “Then what do you intend to do, Sir?”

“In the end, ZiChuan Ning is still a girl. She needs a strong man at her side as regent and protector. He needs to be her blade. He will send fear into anyone who dares to oppose her, keeping them in check. Only then can she survive the first ten years, the most dangerous time of her short reign! That man needs to be brave and competent. He also needs to be beyond loyal, or it will only prove to be counterproductive. So Stirling, who do you believe is capable of such feat?”

Stirling considered for a moment then said: “This is a serious matter concerning the future of House ZiChuan. It’s not my place to judge, but since the Headmaster asked, I can only say what is in my heart. Given the current

situation, Supreme Commander Luo Ming Hai is certainly the most loyal to you and to the House. He is also a very skilled politician and civil servant. In addition, he has the support of the people. I believe he is most suitable.”

ZiChuan Shen Xing smiled: “I’m sure he is very loyal, but he has a fatal weakness. He has no understanding for war. He doesn’t have the support of the army. He may seem like a good choice for now, but that is because he has my backing. Once I’m gone, he will not be able to handle things on his own.”

ZiChuan Shen Xing thought to himself: First of all, he is no match to Di Lin! Sigh, Luo Ming Hai, you still can’t let go of your family’s death. You have let vengeance blind your eyes and dull your mind. That is not the bearing of a skilled politician! If I were you, I would feel sad, I would mourn their deaths, I would pretend as it was a natural disaster like tsunami or earthquake that took their lives. Even in times of war, accidental deaths are common. Why can’t you face it with the calmness of your heart? Why do you have to make Di Lin your arch nemesis? As long as necessary, a skilled politician can work together with the killer of his parents without a moment of hesitation. How do you not know something so simple? Do you not understand that in order to accomplish anything at all as the Supreme Commander, you will need Inspector General’s support? Even Yang Ming Hua only dared to declare his intent for betrayal after he had obtained Inspector General - Xiao Long’s support. If the two of you joined hands, you can easily do whatever you wanted unimpeded by all, not even me... Then again, if it wasn’t for your grudge, I probably wouldn’t have put you as the Supreme Commander and Di Lin as the Inspector General in the first place...

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Stirling pondered a bit then suggested: “Sir, what about Inspector General – Di Lin? He is able, tough and a good general. He is also decisive...”

Before Stirling could finish, ZiChuan Shen Xing interrupted him with a wave of the hand: “I know how capable Di Lin is, but the man enjoys killing and has too many enemies. He cannot inspire loyalty in others. I won’t consider him.”

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ZiChuan Shen Xing wanted to say more, but didn’t: Stirling, have you never paid attention to Di Lin’s eyes? His ambition burns so brightly inside! I have never

seen a man wanting power as badly as he does! How can I put the life of my niece, the lives of my family in the hands of such ambitious and cold-hearted monster? The only reason I kept him alive is because I still need him to keep Luo Ming Hai in check. I definitely have to kill him before my time comes! Or he will become the greatest threat House ZiChuan has ever faced, hundred times more dangerous than Yang Ming Hua!

But who should I send? I'm sure Luo Ming Hai will be more than willing, which will make Stirling and ZiChuan Xiu his enemies. They will no doubt want to avenge their big brother, resulting in an irreconcilable difference between them and Luo Ming Hai. That will be the best outcome. It is the only way for my niece to remain firmly on the throne, and the only way to ensure the future of House ZiChuan.

We have survived the past two hundred years of upheaval, what is two hundred years more...

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Stirling mentioned Ming Hui's name afterwards, but ZiChuan Shen Xing only laughed: "How can I possibly put the fate of the House in the hand of a coward?"

Even Stirling laughed. He thought about it then said: "There is another, who is very loyal to Lady Ning. He is brave, smart, capable and competent in war. If he was given the power of regency, I cannot think of anyone more suitable than him."

"Oh? Who would that be?"

"ZiChuan Xiu. Not only do he and Lady Ning love each other, once they are married, ZiChuan Xiu can naturally assume the position of the regent by being the husband of the Headmaster, and take control of the High Command. Since they are husband and wife, there is no reason for them to betray each other. Their child will also systematically become the next generation Headmaster, enabling a smooth transition of power and ensuring the continuation of House ZiChuan's bloodline at the same time. Furthermore, if ZiChuan Xiu is put in power, he will have both mine and Di Lin's full support. The High Command and the Ministry will no longer be at each other's throat like it is now. The House will be united. We can finally turn our attention outward, making House ZiChuan's

dominion over the world no longer a distant dream! Sir, do you not agree?”

Everyone else Stirling had suggested, ZiChuan Shen Xing merely scoffed at, but this time, he was truly tempted, especially the part that ensured the continuation of House ZiChuan’s bloodline and the chance to conquer the world. How could he not? To become the sole ruler of the whole world, that was the dream of the past seven generations.

But he quickly calmed himself down. ZiChuan Xiu is too cunning and too hard to predict! Everyone has an objective: Di Lin’s objective is power; Luo Ming Hai’s objective is Di Lin’s head; Stirling’s objective is being loyal to the House, and princess Ka Dan... Anyone, as long as they have an objective in mind, their intentions and actions will be easy to predict, but even now, I still can’t figure out what ZiChuan Xiu is after. He would give up the chance to work in the High Command in exchange for the Rebels’ lives; He is not interested in woman either. Even though he and ZiChuan Ning are fairly close, he has always kept her at an arm’s length... So what does he really want?”

Di Lin is dangerous, but Di Lin is also predictable. However I cannot see through ZiChuan Xiu. If you say he is a coward, he did attack into Liu Feng Xi Shan’s base camp with only eight hundred cavalries at his side. He even assassinated a Demon General in the midst of an Army all by himself. He also took part in the assassination of House ZiChuan’s number one fighter in the middle of Central Army’s encampment. Not to mention he went to persuade the rebellious Central Army Officers at the risk of being cut to pieces!

Yet, I can’t really call him brave either. After I and Yang Ming Hua exiled him to the Far East for six years even though he just saved the Capital, he didn’t complain even once after he came back. I even purposely tried to provoke him by placing him in the Army Reserve, and just like before, not a word of complaint. Such patience and shrewdness are short of terrifying! Someone like him is capable of just about anything. Today he can be loyal to you; tomorrow he can sell the entire House ZiChuan to House Liu Feng.

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ZiChuan Shen Xing stopped his train of thought, sounding more pleasant: “Xiu is a decent choice, but he is too young. He won’t be able to inspire confidence in

others. I believe there is an even better candidate than him.”

Failing to defend his friend, Stirling was slightly disappointed. He had to force himself to pay attention: “I’m all ears, Sir.”

“Well, I believe that you are a pretty good choice!”

Blood instantly rushed to his head, Stirling could barely stand straight as he got up from the chair: “Sir, no... Such important task; I’m not worthy.”

“Stirling, sit down and listen to me.” ZiChuan Shen Xing sounded even gentler than before: “I trust your character and loyalty. You have distinguished yourself in the line of duty; you have fought in the war. The army will definitely support you! Everyone knows your reputation, you are honest and just. The people loves you, even those cynical old men from the Council of Elders have nothing but praises for you! What is more, you are a brother to Di Lin and ZiChuan Xiu. If you are in power, they will support you no questions asked! Do you see? You are the only one who meets all the requirements!”

Stirling’s head rang like an anvil. He might be righteous, but he was not immune to the temptation of desires. Seeing the path to a bright and dazzling future set before him, unconsciously, his breathing hastened, his heart raced, and he was overcome by dizziness.

“Soon, you will be both the Supreme Commander and the Central Army Commander. With the elite army of House ZiChuan at your beck and call, you will guard the House from all threats coming from within! As long as you are here, no one would dare having any rebellious thought! You will be the most famous general of House ZiChuan; your name will become legend, reaching far and wide. Even House Liu Feng wouldn’t dare to invade, lest they incur your wrath! How about it, Stirling? For ZiChuan, for me, for yourself, say yes!”

Emotions overwhelmed him, his voice hoarse: “I’m deeply humbled, Sir. I would never have dreamed of such grandeur. I’m honoured by the trust you have placed in me. As long as I’m alive, I will strive to the utmost of my abilities to repay the gratitude of House ZiChuan!”

ZiChuan Shen Xing cheered with joy: “You have made an old man very happy! With you in charge, I will have nothing to regret! I’m sure my niece, ZiChuan Ning will value your loyalty the same way I have. House Stirling’s fate is now

intertwined with House ZiChuan's. We will rise and fall as one! Once you and Li Qing are married, your lineage will continue for countless generations, and your descendants will be born in honor and splendor..."

It was as if he had been doused with cold water, Stirling's face instantly paled: "Sir, despite everything you said, I cannot agree to marry Li Qing. I and Ka Dan have promised each other for life."

ZiChuan Shen Xing looked at him kindly as he told him in a gentle voice: "I don't have anything against Princess Ka Dan. I'm sure she is an exceptional woman, or else she wouldn't have stolen your heart. I'm not saying you have to marry Li Qing either. In fact, if you fancied any lady from any household within House ZiChuan's borders, I would not only give you my blessing, I would even make it happen... But you cannot marry Ka Dan!"

"Why? Sir?"

ZiChuan Shen Xing sighed: "Stirling, how do you not understand? Wake up! Demons are our greatest enemy. You will be destined to become the Supreme Commander, leading House ZiChuan's armies in battle. If you marry their princess, you will have lost all the faith and respect your men had for you. How are you going to lead them then? The Far Eastern Army will be the first to reject you!"

"Think about it, you and Ka Dan grew up in different worlds. Your living habits are vastly different. You may not realize it now, but once you start living together then things change. Love is not the same as marriage!"

"Besides, given your position and character, finding a suitable mate will be the least of your problems. The truth is, if you are willing, I can even betrothe ZiChuan Ning to you! By then you will be the Headmaster's husband, and the official regent of the House. You will be second to none!"

"Consider it for a second, Stirling. As a man, you should attach importance to your work, and put the need of the House above that of your own! The love between a man and a woman comes and goes, it won't last! What is more important? A demon princess? Or your eternal glory and triumph? You are a brilliant man, Stirling. You should know how to make the right decision!"

Stirling's face paled; he was caught in a maelstrom of emotions. Two



conflicting thoughts fought fiercely in the center of his mind, all the while ZiChuan Shen Xing's enticing voice continued to echo loudly between his ears: "Eternal glory! Second to none!" And a moment later, Ka Dan's teary gazes appeared in front of him... The thoughts spun wildly inside his head, as if it was about to explode!

"Sir, I've already made up my mind." Stirling rose up and gave the man a deep bow, speaking hoarsely: "I will marry Ka Dan." His voice filled with unyielding determination.

ZiChuan Shen Xing slumped back into his chair, staring at him quietly. His eyes did not seem all that angry, instead, it looked a little bit sad.

"I'm grateful for everything you have done for me, Sir. I cannot express how much everything meant to me, but I'm terribly sorry. I will have to disappoint you. I hope you can forgive me for my stubbornness. Please believe me when I say that no matter what, my loyalty to House ZiChuan hasn't changed, and never will..."

ZiChuan Shen Xing interrupted Stirling's words with another gesture of the hand and closed his tiring eyes.

And silence took over.

After a long while, ZiChuan Shen Xing finally opened his eyes again, asking softly: "Is that your final decision? Are you really going to resign?"

"Yes. I wish to apologize thousand times, Sir. But I will not abandon my duty. If you would allow it, I wish to wait until the rebellion in the Far East has ended before I resign and get married. I will not put you in a difficult position, Sir."

ZiChuan Shen Xing seemed distracted, perhaps he was listening, or perhaps he didn't hear a word he said. In the end, he sighed regretfully: "Perhaps it is fate... Leave me."

Suddenly, the man seemed to have aged for years. Every wart on his face seemed more obvious as every wrinkle smoothed from the exhaustion, gasping, looking incredibly tired. In that instant, Stirling noticed for the first time, the Headmaster had already become a powerless old man.

A sense of pity welled up inside Stirling: The old man had so much weight on

his shoulders! He probably expected him to share his burdens, and instead, he was mercilessly refused by him.

The pity turned into guilt: "Sir, you..."

"Leave..." ZiChuan Shen Xing said it for the second time.

Stirling couldn't help but feel: "The old man in front of him was so incredibly fragile, so incredibly lonely!"

He bowed deeply once more, beseeching earnestly: "I'm leaving, Sir! Please take care of yourself. You are the hope of all of our people! I'm sure everything will turn out for the best in the end. You don't need worry too much."

ZiChuan Shen Xing did not answer.

Stirling stopped himself in front of the door, turning around and imploring once again: "Please take care of yourself, Sir. I'm leaving." As he was about leave, a voice called out to him: "Hold on."

Stirling turned back: "Sir?"

ZiChuan Shen Xing's hand quivered as he pulled open the draw, from which he retrieved a black leathery box: "Here, take this."

Perplexed, frowned, Stirling took the leathery box and opened it. Inside was a beautifully crafted diamond sapphire bracelet. Stirling might not be an expert, but he could tell it was worth a small fortune.

"Give that to Ka Dan. I know you don't have much, but she is a princess. She deserves a token of love worthy of her stature."

"Sir, I can't. This is too much..."

"It's all right. I have always wanted to give that to you on the day of your wedding. Li Qing, Ka Dan, it is all the same. This is just an old man's blessing to you! I wish you a long and happy life together, and your years be filled with love and joy!"

Stirling wanted to decline, but somehow he couldn't utter a word, as if something was stuck in his throat.

"Do not feel sad. I understand, everyone has their own path to follow. I cannot

force mine upon you. We will do as you say. You may resign after the war ends. Unfortunately, I will not be able to attend your wedding. Remember to get as far away from Di Du as possible, and do not come back. You are too good and too honest for this place.”

“Perhaps after your children are born, you and your family can come visit me, sweep my tomb, light a stick of incense, trim the weeds and clean my gravestone.<sup>[1]</sup> Both you and Ka Dan are beautiful people. I’m sure your children will be just as beautiful. Remember to tell them, here lies your grandfather, Shen Xing. I think by then, you are probably the only one left who still remembers me, and will visit me. Remember, you have to come...”

Stirling couldn’t contain his emotions any longer as tears sprang to his eyes. He cried: “Sir...” as he leapt into his arms, and tears flowed.

ZiChuan Shen Xing held Stirling's head tightly and close to his chest, whispering to him: "I have always wondered, if you were my son, or if I had a son like you, how great would that be... It would be wonderful I’m sure....” Tears streaked down his cheeks, and splashed onto Stirling’s thick and black hair.

# Purple River - Chapter 8.3

## Chapter 08 Part 03 – Year's End

Imperial Calendar, Year 779, winter came especially late this year. The first wave of cold only started to push through Fort Warren and head westwards, crossing the continent, in mid December. Temperature dropped under zero in less than ten hours. Even though the first sight of snow had yet to come, thunder could be heard in the distant sky. In front of the Headmaster's House, a flag post was struck by a sudden bolt of lightning, breaking it in half, which subsequently hit the two guards on duty on the way down. Soon, a downpour hit the area, followed by three days of storm and thunder. When the sun rose again, a colourful arc of rainbow had appeared in the eastern sky, in contrast to the west, where clouds had formed a giant cross over the horizon.

Not many could recall ever seeing such peculiar sight in the sky except for a few wiser old men who could still recall the winter of fifty years ago. It was the same back then, thunder in the late winter, followed by days of storm. But in the spring, three-hundred-thousand men from the Border Army rebelled against House ZiChuan.

On the Plain of Ancestors, a place less than ten miles away from Di Du, the Army of ZiChuan encountered the Rebel Forces joined by House Liu Feng's Army, and a fierce battle ensued. The sea of corpses stretched over dozens of miles across the battlefield, more than wild dogs could eat. The old men who remembered the battle firmly believed: "This is an omen. The Army of ZiChuan will engage the Rebel Army in a massive battle of unprecedented scale. The death toll will probably exceed that of the terrible battle of fifty years ago."

Even though the Council of Elders had already agreed to the terms made by

the Rebels and a peace treaty was underway, almost everyone, including the officers, nobles, and even the common peasants had the feeling that, ultimately, a fierce battle against the Rebel Army was inevitable, and a terrible disaster was about to befall them.

The City of Di Du was in a state of panic, false rumours spread everywhere. Many believed that it was the sins of men that brought the wrath of the heavens upon them. However, as to whom the evil sinner might be, their opinions varied greatly. Some even pointed their fingers at the Supreme Commander - Luo Ming Hai and the Inspector General - Di Lin.

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As if the world was set out to prove this ominous omen, on December 21st, near the year's end, a small incident in the Capital had escalated into bloodshed.

The cause of the incident was quite simple. In a small local tavern in the city, several drunken officers from the High Command started causing a ruckus and got into a fight with the patrolling constables from the Ministry. A small bout quickly turned into an all out battle between the officers and the constables. How it got so out of hand, however, would forever remain a mystery, because none of the officers who first started the riot could still speak.

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By the time the situation was resolved, the tension between the High Command and the Ministry was at an all-time high, to the point both Commanders could only access their respective workplace under the protection of a large armed escort. Their men treated each others like enemies, piling up barricades along every major street in the Capital. Soon, the city had turned into a warzone, with conflict brewing around every corner. It didn't take long before everyone came to the realization: We must never put Di Lin and Luo Ming Hai near each other, or a similar riot could happen again at any time.

In the end, it was Luo Ming Hai who petitioned for Di Lin to be sent to the Far Eastern Front... In fact, the same had been suggested by the Council of Elders much earlier. They thought it was a huge waste to keep such a capable general in the Capital.

ZiChuan Shen Xing had always been wary of letting him go; Di Lin was like a

ferocious hawk. It was easy to set him free, but much harder to rein him in. He was much like a double-edged blade, which could hurt your enemy just as much as it could hurt you. But seeing the situation Di Lin and Luo Ming Hai were in now, he had no choice but to separate them. When he informed Di Lin of his new assignment, Di Lin complained: "Sir, I have done nothing wrong. Why am I being exiled to the distant Far East?" He sounded like an innocent child.

ZiChuan Shen Xing reassured him: "How is it an exile? The situation in the Far East is still unstable. We need a high ranking officer to supervise the transition. The House has entrusted you with that responsibility. Everything you do there will be important to our war effort!"

Di Lin kept expressing his reluctance to depart and leave the comfortable lifestyle of the Capital behind. ZiChuan Shen Xing had to pull out every trick in the book to convince him that he wasn't being punished, but instead, that he was being offered a great opportunity. Even though Di Lin reluctantly agreed in the end, in truth, he couldn't be happier: Luo Ming Hai you stupid fool! Once I get to the Far East, I will be like a bird out of its cage. As the highest ranking officer in the Far East, I will have several hundred thousands of House ZiChuan's finest under my command! The moment ZiChuan Shen Xing dies, I will march for the Capital with a great army. With ZiChuan Xiu and Stirling at my side, what hope will you have to stop me?! Killing you will be like squashing an ant!"

"Sir, how can I refuse a request coming directly from you? However, there is just one thing I...

"Oh? You can tell me anything."

"My wife, Lin Xiu Jia is pregnant and will soon give birth. As you already know, Luo Ming Hai hates me to his core. There is nothing he wouldn't do! What if he did anything to my wife while I am away from Di Du..." Di Lin wanted ZiChuan Shen Xing to let him take his wife to the Far East, eliminating the only thing they could use against him when the time came.

"Oh." ZiChuan Shen Xing readily replied: "Is that why you are worried? You have nothing to worry about. I'll have everything taken care of. Your wife will stay here in my house. No matter how reckless Luo Ming Hai may be, he will not dare to harm her while she is under my roof. I promise you, she will be kept

safe."

The answer caught Di Lin off guard. He hurriedly responded: "That is too kind, Sir. But I wouldn't want to trouble you with my own affairs. If I could just take her with me, I'm perfectly able to..."

"Hmm? Di Lin, that is very wrong of you. Lin Xiu Jia is with child. How can you let her march with the army? Not to mention you will be putting her in harm's way. Are you worried that I might take advantage of your wife? Haha, I'm old enough to be your father!"

Cold sweat broke out on Di Lin's forehead as he tried to sound appreciative: "You are making fun of me, Sir." Meanwhile, his head screamed profusely: "Shit, this is bad! I went for the wool and came home shorn! What do I do? What do I say? Damn it!"

"Very well then, it is decided. Di Lin, if you are still hesitating, then I will have to assume you don't trust me!" ZiChuan Shen Xing's voice turned serious.

Di Lin jolted, lowering his head: "As you wish, Sir. My wife will be in your care." Before he knew, sweat had soaked through the back of his thick uniform. Smiling, he curtsied as he left the Headmaster's House. He carried that smile all the way back to the Ministry, where he ordered everyone to leave the room. Behind locked doors, his rage flared into a frenzy, shouting: "Damn you, old fox!" By the time he had finished, there was nothing left in the room for him to break.

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Imperial Calendar, Year 779, December 28th, Forty-thousand Military Constables led by Inspector General Di Lin departed from Di Du, marching for the Far Eastern Front.

Year 780, January 1st, in the Far Eastern province of Wargo, a Beastman rider raced through the mountain path under the dawning sun and into Xiu's Company's encampment. He quickly dismounted from his sweat drenched horse and spoke to the drowsy guard on duty in fluent human tongue: "Urgent report for Xiu the Lightbringer. I must deliver this to him in person!"

Xiu's Company spent the whole night celebrating the new year. ZiChuan Xiu had just fallen asleep when Bai Chuan woke him: "Old man Dren has important

news." Dren's report got him wide awake if he wasn't already: "We encountered a large unknown Rebel Force in the province of Sha Jia. They have destroyed three of Xiu's Company's Branch Offices, causing significant financial damage." ZiChuan Xiu immediately sent a messenger to inform Stirling of the sudden development.

Stirling instantly realized the importance of the report. In conjunction with the information he managed to gather, it was clear to him that the situation had reached critical mass. In response, he gave the emergency order to assemble his own forces and wrote a detailed letter to the First Commander Ming Hui stationed in the Far Eastern province of Dusa. In the letter, Stirling listed all the suspicious movements the Rebel Forces made over the recent month, advising him to be on full alert and to pull his forces back into a defensive position in case of an attack.

A messenger was supposed to deliver the letter, but the Central Army's Staff Officer Tang Ping needed to discuss other matters with Ming Hui at the time and so, Stirling gave him the letter. However, Tang Ping never made it to Ming Hui's command tent. In the forest twenty miles out from province Dusa, he encountered the advancing party of the Demon Army. A sharp and strong arrow pierced his lung, sending him tumbling from his horse. As he crashed into the frosty snow, a well of blood gushed from his mouth. Seeing the Demon Dragon Riders rapidly approaching, he tore Stirling's letter to pieces with his trembling hands and watched the fragments of it get carried away by the wind over the snow covered Far Eastern Plain...

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That night, the flames of war had painted the sky red. The Demon Army, a great host of four-hundred-and-seventeen divisions, totalling over one-million-and-three-hundred-thousand demons, led by the Invincible Demon God King Himself had crossed the boundary stone marking the border between the Demon Empire and House ZiChuan, and another seven-hundred-thousand allied Rebel Forces of all races marched in front of them as vanguard...



# Purple River - Chapter 8.4

## Chapter 08 Part 04 – Heaven’s Fall

Under the grey sky, snow rained nonstop.

The Rebel Army violated the peace treaty and reignited the flames of war. Commander Fang Jin led over a hundred-thousand Militias in eager pursuit of the Rebel Forces after they had ambushed one of his scouting parties. Following their disappearing trail in the rain of flying snow petals, his army had marched into the Plains of Moon Bay.

In front of them, a large shadow loomed over the horizon. The gasping soldiers hesitantly halted their steps, peering into the distance: “What is that? It is all dark. Is that a forest?” “That does look like a forest, but why is it getting bigger?”

A veteran soldier tilted his head back slightly, hoping to see further into the distance. He yelled abruptly: “It is moving! That is no forest! It is an army heading our way!”

The realization spread like a wave as confusion began to ripple through the ranks of the militias: “That is one huge army! They must be the Rebels!” “What do we do?”

On top of his horse, Commander Fang Jin inspected the lines, shouting: “Do not be afraid! The Rebel Army is made of farmers. They are no match for us on the open field; we can defeat them no matter how many men they have! Form the lines and wait for them to come to us!” His calm and imposing presence quickly brought the soldiers back to themselves. Under his leadership, the militias had started moving into position.

One group at the time, the militias marched into the open and fanned out

across the full width of the plain. In an instant, a giant square formation made of steel was occupying the entire Plain of Moon Bay. Mounted couriers dashed between each smaller formation, relaying the order: “Ready~!” The infantries raised their spears in unison, and a sea of cold steel radiated brilliantly over the giant square formation. Riders readily mounted their horses on the flanks, preparing themselves for the counter-attack against the enemy. Rows upon rows of unsheathed sabres shined like a glittering band of light in the snow. As they waited, snow fell silently on top of their helmets and shoulders, blanketing them in a shallow layer of white.

From the distance, hooves thundered and earth shook ever so slightly with their every step. An expanse of darkness rapidly approached. Like a tidal wave, a tsunami or the contour of the clouds, its shape became increasingly clearer. Long and sharpened steel extended from the edge of the darkness, behind them, hundreds of thousands of hooves tore across the snow covered plain, kicking up a trail of snow in their wake. It was as if the darkness was galloping amidst the clouds, flying towards them! Like a legendary monster from the darkest part of the earth, ready to swallow anything or anyone standing in its way!

“Steady!” The mounted couriers dashed between the lines shouting: “Front row, kneeled-position!” The soldiers let the blunt end of their spears rest on the ground, arrowhead facing forward, and went down to one knee, bracing themselves for the impact. The officers shouted loudly next to their ears: “For House ZiChuan! Fight with courage, honor and glory!”

“Steady!” The couriers shouted the order again. Heeding the command, the soldiers planted their feet deeper into the earth while holding tightly onto their spears. Everyone’s heart pounded against their chest. The soldiers on the front row shivered uncontrollably as they chattered their teeth. Tasked with overseeing the battle, the constables were lined up loosely behind them, aiming their sharpened arrows at the soldiers’ backs. Meanwhile, the enemy forces approached with surprising speed, narrowing the distance with each passing second! The hideous faces of their riders and the steam coming from their horses’ noses were barely visible amidst a sea of banners and a forest of spears. Hundreds of thousands of horses and men in a compact formation surged towards them with the power of a storm and the speed of a hurricane!

Wind peeled away the shroud of secrecy, revealing the truth behind the snowy curtains. Suddenly, a voice overcome with terror shrieked in the middle of the lines: “Heavens! They are Demons!” Instantly, panic broke out everywhere. Soldiers yelled with complete disregard to army discipline: “Demons! Demons are coming!”

“Heavens! Run! Run for your lives!” One after another, soldiers threw away their weapons and abandoned their post. Trying to stop them, the officers shouted loudly: “Stand your ground! This is your last warning!”

“Stop! I order you to stand fast!”

“Loose!” The Juridical officer mercilessly waved his hand, ordering the constables to let loose a barrage of arrows, felling a row of deserting soldiers in the midst of their outcries. Yet, it did nothing to stem the tide, as more and more soldiers started to flee! Fang Jin shouted on his horse: “Do not be afraid! They are rebels in disguise! Do not be scared! Return to your posts! For House ZiChuan...”

The heavens collapsed, drowning out his voice in a thunderous roar. “Samuhali! (For the Emperor!)” Demon soldiers roared: “Ougala! (Kill!)” All doubts were erased in an instant, because those were the war cries of the Demon Empire’s Royal Army! Earth shattered and heavens fell. The sight of the green skinned creatures of the Demon Empire had always terrorized humans to their core. They would never forget how, three hundred years ago, it was those monsters who destroyed the once powerful Empire of Light. Less than two-hundred-thousand Demons had swept through the world of Western River, killing the last Emperor and Field Marshal of the Empire of light, annihilating five-hundred-thousands of Empire’s finest on the battlefield of Blue River. The legends described the demons as man-eating, fire-spewing monsters. They were said to be the greatest, cruellest evil of this world!

The square formation crumbled. Soldiers ignored the orders as they discarded their weapons and fled. Like a flood or a tidal wave, they overran the constables overseeing the battle. Everywhere, voices panicked: “Run! Run! Run for your lives!” The routing soldiers pushed, pulled, collided and trampled over each other, leaving a field of weapons and banners glittering over the battlefield. It took but an instant for an entire army to vanish into thin air, as if it never

existed.

The Demon riders charged into the scattering mass, slaughtering anyone in their path. Blended with countless death throes, thousands of Demonic cheers reached high above the clouds. Fang Jin ceased his pointless shouting. There was nothing left for him to do. Knowing his fate was sealed, he watched in silence as his entire army scattered in front of him, running across the battlefield like scared rabbits. Seeing waves upon waves of soldiers fleeing past him, a horde of demons laughing wildly on their heels, his army being massacred and House ZiChuan's banner being trampled, he was deeply ashamed. Over a hundred thousand men were defeated without a fight! It was a shameful display a hundred times worse than the battle of Red Lake!"

Still gasping, his personal guard Captain, Ming Ke ran towards him, asking: "Sir, the Demons will be upon us soon. We need to fall back!" Fang Jin looked at him sideways, not saying a word, then shifted his eyes away from the battlefield, towards the grey sky above. Ming Ke thought he didn't hear him clearly, he repeated: "Sir, we must retreat! We can still regroup..."

"Go! Ming Ke." Fang Jin leapt onto his warhorse as he told him: "When you get back, tell my two daughters that their father was a coward, but he would never do anything to tarnish his name." He exhaled deeply, and lowered his voice: "Death was but a word! I was such a fool!"

Ming Ke hurriedly grabbed his reins: "Sir, where are you going?" Fang Jin smiled to him in silence, then pulled his sword free and severed the cord, dashing forward, in opposite direction of everyone else. He charged straight towards the incoming mass of the Demon Army, leaving Ming Ke stunned where he left. The young officer watched the stalwart form of Fang Jin gradually disappearing into the crowd of fleeing soldiers. Everything was so serene and so peaceful. In that moment, above the battlefield deafened by the cries of war, the spirit of a great man ascended.

That was the last time anyone saw him. He would forever be known as the Valiant Commander. No one quite understood what he meant with his last set of words, except one. Di Lin knew; that was how Fang Jin wished to end his life. He didn't want to live on under someone else's thumb. Di Lin cursed softly under his breath: "Idiot." Then took off his hat and saluted in the direction of the Far East.

Fang Jin was the first Commander to fall in the War of Holy Defence. He died like a hero, charging head on into the Demon Army all by himself. Both his body and horse were full of arrows before he even got near the Demons, but he was still alive, and he fought on against several of their riders despite the dozen arrows protruding from his armor like the branches from a tree. Demon soldiers realized he was a high ranking officer and tried to capture him alive, but anyone who got within five steps of him was quickly cut down without mercy, leaving a ring of body piling up around him. In the end, the Demon officer was forced to give the order, and over a dozen spears penetrated Fang Jin's upper torso at the same time. In a fountain of blood, he fell. Two demon soldiers, one green skinned infantryman and a black skinned rider rushed forward to take his head. To their surprise, Fang Jin suddenly rose up from the ground, splitting the green skinned soldier in half, and then he fell, for the final time. The black skinned rider smiled at his dead competitor, exposing his mouthful of rotten teeth. Carefully, he cut off Fang Jin's head and added it to the chain of heads sitting on the back of his horse.

That night, the moon above the Plains of Moon Bay shrivelled in darkness, and snow continued to rain. It was as if the Heavens were shying away from the massacre, hiding its eyes behind the clouds. Over a-hundred-thousand Humans were on the run, and over two-hundred-thousand Demons were on the chase. Demon's excited cheers and Human's agonized screams echoed in the air. Even though the Human soldiers were already on their knees with their hands raised, begging for mercy, the demon riders never hesitated for a second when they decapitated them, separating their heads from their shoulder. The Demons knew, some of the Human's heads could fetch them a fair price. Taking in prisoners would only serve to slow them down. It was much faster to simply cut them off.

In order to escape the Demon pursuers, Human soldiers scrambled over each other to jump into the icy river, trying desperately to swim ashore. However, the Rebel Army of all races had been waiting for them on the other side, and a rain of arrows welcomed them. Struggling, the Human soldiers wailed in the water, waiting for the death to come. Soon, the river was painted red, as the rapid stream carried their drowning bodies downstream... Hundred-and-fifteen-thousand soldiers of House ZiChuan participated in the battle of Moon bay that

day, only less than five thousand of them managed to escape the initial onslaught. General Rudy's Demon Army pursued the runners relentlessly along the way, in the end, only eighty seven managed to reach Fort Warren alive. All this time, the snow never stopped falling. And hundreds of thousands headless bodies were buried in the white. It was as if none of it ever happened, the plain of Moon Bay was still so serene, so spotless.

In the three days that followed, Demon Empire unleashed a series of attack against the defenders. Like an unstoppable flood, the Demon Forces poured through the gap created by Rudy's Demon Army. Meanwhile, the careless armies of House ZiChuan were expecting a prolonged period of peace, and like sleeping lambs, they never stood a chance against the ferocious wolves of the Demon Empire...

Deep into the night, the same time when the alert sounded from outside the camp, Demon Dragon Riders broke through the barricades and into the undefended western encampment of the Black Banner Army before any of them could respond, and a massacre began. House ZiChuan's soldiers woke up into a nightmare. With no weapons in hand, no directions to follow, they were mercilessly cut down by sabres, stabbed by spears and pierced by arrows. Those who survived the demons were trampled by their own, burned down with their tent or drowned in the nearby river... By the time the first light of the morning sun reached them, the western encampment was left with nothing but dead bodies, not one of the twenty thousand men stationed there was still standing.

Through Far Eastern First Commander, Ming Hui's heroic efforts, he managed to gather three divisions... it was all the forces he had left...

In an attempt to thwart the Demon's advance, he ordered the counter attack. In the province of Dusa, ten thousand Human infantries and cavalries were taught the meaning of desperation as they stared down at the most horrifying creatures in the world... Under the great golden banner of the Demon God King, close to two-hundred-thousand demons and armored beasts of the Royal Guard Brigade marched towards them, seeking to overwhelm them...

After the battle of Dusa, the entire defence line of House ZiChuan crumbled. First it was only small groups of infantries retreating from the frontlines sparingly, then it was entire division running away, abandoning their position. It

didn't take long before any chance of an organized defence disappeared along with them. In the midst of chaos, and not having a unified command, the remaining militia armies were easily cut off and isolated by the rapidly advancing Demon Army. When confronted by a hopelessly superior force, the undisciplined militias surrendered without a fight. Even though they hastily discarded their weapons, it did not stop the Demons from severing their heads... Next to the pile of headless bodies, the Demons from the Seneya Tribe celebrated their victory as they kicked the skulls of the Human soldiers around like toys...

Behind the retreating Armies of House ZiChuan, several powerful Demon Armies were in pursuit. Kardun, the Prince of Demons led his army to the north, attempting to close the encirclement on the large armed forces still stationed in province Deja and Iriya. The quiet Demon General, Ling Buxu led his forces south. Following the great road of Far East, his forces marched into the rear and undefended regions of House ZiChuan. When the scouting team of a dozen Demon Dragon Riders suddenly appeared at the Bridge of Blue River, thousands of Human civilian and soldiers broke out in a panic, trying to cross the bridge...

But far worse, the defenders on the western coast mistakenly assumed it was the bulk of the Demon Army as they began cutting away at the bridge... and soul-tearing screams ensued on the eastern side of the river...

# Purple River - Chapter 8.5

## Chapter 08 Part 05 – Stem the Tide

Mixed with the fresh air after a long day of snow, the first light of dawn shone through the open windows and into the room.

The subtle change in the room brought Stirling out of his sleep as he jolted back from the desk. Seeing Deputy Commander Qin Lu coming through the doors, he asked: “Any news?” His eyes were bloodshot; he was drained.

Qin Lu shook his head, but Stirling wouldn’t give up. He asked again: “I’m talking about the location of Commander Ming Hui and Commander Fang Jin, where are their armies? How can we not know anything?”

Qin Lu kept shaking his head: “I’m sorry, Sir. The Demon’s scouts are everywhere. They only attack officers and messengers. None of the messengers we dispatched so far has made their way back. In all likelihood, we have been cut off. It is complete chaos out there.”

Stirling paced back and forth in the room with many thoughts racing through his head: How big is the Demon’s Army? What is their goal? Are they here to seize the Far East? Or are they here to distract us from moving against the Rebels? Is it just another raid? Where is the bulk of their army? It has been three days since the first attack; we still know nothing at all. We are fighting blind! Even worse, I don’t even know where my allies are.

Stirling couldn’t help but mention the obvious: “We need one alive! Just one!”

Qin Lu watched him in silence, knowing there was nothing he could do. Since the Central Army was stationed further away from the frontline, it was not hit by the first wave of attacks. Even though Stirling had gathered his forces and were



on full alert, they still lost several scouting parties due to the harassments from Demon's advancing forces. Two days ago, Central Army's scouting squad Captain, Banner Master Lu Zhen went to gather intelligence on the Demon Army. He promised to bring back a live prisoner within ten hours, but it had been two days, not even a word so far. He was either dead or captured.

The situation was simply awful, Stirling thought. Everything was messed up! He tried focus, asking: "Is there any news from Xiu's Company?"

"Sir, the entire Xiu's company disappeared. Their camp was burned to the ground. I'm afraid that Sir ZiChuan Xiu may have been..."

"No way. Xiu is clever and capable. I'm sure he is fine!"

Qin Lu knew he misspoke, hurriedly correcting himself: "Of course. It is as you said, Sir."

Stirling inhaled deeply, expelling any worrying thoughts from his mind: "Very well. Qin Lu, we can't wait like this any longer. I think we should head towards the province of Dusa and regroup with the First Commander. What do you think?"

Qin Lu hesitated for a moment, finally, he said: "Sir, the Demons seem to have come in force this time. In my opinion, our best course of action is to retreat towards Fort Warren. That is the safest choice."

Stirling shook his head: "We can't run away like this and leave our allies behind. Prepare the men. We are leaving for the province of Dusa." Under the morning light, accompanied by the rumbling sound of the wagons, the clashing of steel and the neighing of the horses, the Central Army had begun their march eastwards. While they marched down the great road of Far East, Stirling witnessed the most memorable scene of his life. An endless queue of refugees coming down the snaking road, flooding from the east, headed west. Everyone knew: The vicious Demons are coming. The only way to survive is to head west, and go through Fort Warren.

Some had wagons filled with boxes, some carried their heavy belongings on their back, and some walked along with nothing but their bare feet. A poor old man staggered forward with his sheep. A lady trudged along with a child in her arm, while dragging the heavy luggage over the cold and snow ridden road

behind her. Then she fell. The child in her arm cried out, and so did the mother. An endless stream of refugees passed her by, but not one gave her a hand, helping her to get up. The pain and the misery of war had numbed their hearts, and made them selfish. Their eyes were filled with confusion and despair. They have lost their home, lost their land, and lost their families. What would their future be like? Amongst the refugees, many were soldiers. A heavily wounded soldier lay on the stretcher sitting on the side of the road, crying, screaming: “Mother, mother!”

Limping on his crutches, a soldier who lost his leg cursed with each step he took. His companions had left him behind. Another soldier, covered in dirt and bloodstain from head to toe, sat alone in the snow, grovelling constantly: “I’m from the seventy-first division! Does anyone know where my unit is? I beg you, take me with you! I broke my leg! Please!” Men strode past him with studiously averted eyes; nobody stopped to help him. Eventually he ran out of voice, he cried, but no sound came out. He clawed and grasped at the grass still growing underneath the snow, and like a worm, he crawled forward, moving ever so slowly. The frontlines had crumpled; large group of soldiers joined the ranks of the refugees. A few deserters showed up here and there, the shame had made them take off their hats and uniforms. Dressing like civilians, they walked along them with their eyes held down. But most of the soldiers were a part of an entire division retreating from the frontline. Seeing their faces, Stirling didn’t need to ask, he already saw the desperation in their eyes: The situation at the front is much worse than he had expected.

His heart ached at the sight of the defeated soldiers. It wasn’t that long when since they were dressed in starched uniforms, singing songs of battle, eyes flashing with pride. Back then, they were so eager to join the battle to defend House ZiChuan. But now, their uniform was torn and dirty. Instead of calling them soldiers, they looked much more like beggars. If anything, those disgraced soldiers could find solace in knowing they were not alone. There were thousands upon thousands of them. Some were even completely shameless about it. An officer shouted on top of his horse: “Get out of my way! I’m a Banner Master!” But the soldiers ignored him. The officer was furious as he lashed out with his whips. Several angry soldiers instantly turned on him, pushing him and the horse down the cliff, where screams echoed in the darkness.

Under the shade at the corner of an intersection, an officer covered in dirt claimed to have received the direct order from the Far Eastern First Commander himself. He was instructed to stop any soldier from passing through, reorganizing them and readying them for battle.

“Soldiers, do not be afraid! Stop, come back!” His voice was hoarse: “House ZiChuan is under attack! Our survival is at stake! Protect our home, protect our land! Soldiers, this is a holy war! We must not falter! Be brave! Come back!” He repeated his words again and again, yet, they did nothing to slow down the routing soldiers from walking past him. He grabbed the arm of a nearby soldier; the soldier pushed him away without looking. Pulling free of his weapon, the officer angrily shouted threats and curses. He tried to stop another, and was immediately punched in the face, sending him tumbling backwards.

Marching through the busy roads filled with wagons and refugees, the Central Army pressed eastwards in battle formation. Unlike the refugees moving in the opposite direction, they were orderly and confident. Everywhere they went, they revitalized those around them.

Stirling asked every defeated soldier he could find, but what he got was a mixed result: “Yes, we were defeated at province of Sha Jia.” “We were defeated in province of Minske, our Banner Master died.” “Commander Fang Jin? Not sure. I heard he died, or perhaps he was captured. We haven’t seen him.” “Commander Ming Hui? He probably died too. We don’t know! We were surrounded by Demons. Out of the couple thousand men from my unit, only the few of us here made it out of alive. We didn’t have time to look around.”

The question regarding the size of the Demon Army was even more of a mess. One of the soldiers said there were so many Demons that their lines stretched over dozens of miles, while another soldier argued that there were only a few divisions at most; some even claimed to have seen the Demon God King himself.

There were all kinds of rumors circulating as well. Some believed the armies of House ZiChuan stationed at the front line had all been defeated, and both Commander Fang Jin and Ming Hui were killed; some heard Commander Ming Hui was fighting back along the coast of Grey Waters, and he had defeated one of the Demon Armies. In the end, it was a wounded soldier that told Stirling: “First Commander Ming Hui’s unit has crossed the western coast of Grey

Waters, and retreated from province of Dusa to the provincial Capital of Iriya.” After a series of questions, answers and discussions with his fellow officers, Stirling believed that that particular information was most credible. Thus, he gave the order to change the direction and march for the province of Iriya.

A day later, Stirling’s forces arrived at the City of Iriya. The situation in the city was no different than what he had seen on his way over. Large waves of deserters flooded into the city after their defeat at the Dusa frontline. Refugees, wagons moved through the streets day and night. It was pure chaos. Most of the government buildings had been abandoned. The market square was filled with defeated soldiers and confused civilians. Everyone was saying: “The Demons are right behind us!” But not a single person took charge of City’s defence.

The arrival of the Central Army caused a sensation in the city. When the Governor of Iriya, Eeling was informed of Stirling’s arrival, he immediately came to see him.

“What is the situation?” Skipping the formalities, Stirling asked as soon as he saw him, then added: “Are Commander Ming Hui and Commander Fang Jin here as well? Where is the Demon Army?”

Eeling looked exhausted; his eyes were red from lack of sleep and his voice hoarse: “Sir Stirling, the situation is pretty bad. I mean really bad! It is good that you are here. Sir Ming Hui is at the Town Hall. Do you wish to see him?”

“Yes! Lead the way!” Stirling quickly dismounted. Squeezing through the market square crowded with wounded soldiers, he entered the Town Hall. Inside, he saw the Far Eastern Front First Commander – Ming Hui.

Ming Hui had collapsed. He curled up into a ball and covered his face. Huddling alone in the corner, his shoulders quivered as he cried silently. The way his dirty uniform looked on him was not pretty. It even began to smell... Compared to the gentlemanly and spirited Commander Ming Hui from before, he was truly defeated.

Deputy Commander of the Black Banner Army standing beside him explained to Stirling: “Three days ago, Sir Ming Hui tried to kill himself once, but I stopped him. He has been like this ever since, huddling in the corner, ignoring everyone, and not eating anything.”

Stirling walked towards him, speaking gently: "Sir Ming Hui. It's me, Stirling." Stirling had to call out his name three times before he reacted. He slowly raised his head; his eyes were glazed with fear, and his face was a ghost, tears and snot everywhere. He stared quietly at Stirling as if he was looking at a stranger.

Stirling felt so sad seeing him this way, he asked: "Sir, do you know what happened to your Army?" "Do you know where Sir Fang Jin is?" "How many Demons are out there?"

Ming Hui stared at Stirling like a stranger, not saying a word. In the end, it was that Deputy Commander who answered: "Sir Stirling. The Demons ambushed us three days ago. We were lucky to make it out alive."

Stirling turned to him: "What about the western encampment? Where are the rest of your forces?"

"The western encampment was overrun. Four divisions were cut to pieces. We have lost all contact with our other forces. We only know that entire frontline has crumbled."

"What about Fang Jin and his men?"

"The Militia Army is pretty much gone. If anyone survived, they are now deserters. I asked a runaway yesterday, and he confirms that Fang Jin's militias were annihilated at the plains of Moon Bay. Over a hundred-thousand militias were killed. Commander Fang Jin... some says he was killed in battle; some says he was captured. Nobody knows for certain."

Stirling could feel the strength slowly draining from his legs. He had expected the unfavourable situation, but he never thought they were losing this badly. A whole army was annihilated, and another was crushed. One commander died, and another had lost his mind. He forcibly calmed himself down, asking: "How many troops did Demons deploy? Where are they now?"

The young officer thought about it for moment, then answered as discreet as possible: "We don't know the exact size of the Demon Army. But what we do know is that it is not less than three-hundred-thousand."

Stirling gasped. That was already three times of Central Army's numbers.

"As to where they are now, we are not sure either..."

Stirling finally lost it. Letting his anger pour forth, he criticized him harshly: “How do you not know? What have you been doing? Do you have to wait until the Demons come knocking on our doors? How is it possible that we don’t even know the size of their armies?”

The officer swallowed hard and said: “Sir, as you know. Before the rebellion, the Far Eastern Army had many non-human divisions stationed near the borders. They were specialized in providing reconnaissance of the Demon Empire’s movements. But after the rebellion, they all joined the side of the Demons. In other words, we are now blind; we can’t see the Demons even if they are right under our noses... In addition, all our forces are drawn from the core regions of the realm after the rebellion. Unlike the Far Eastern Army, we have no experience fighting the Demons at all. Facing them for the first time, we all panicked, and our losses were great. With Sir Ming Hui like this, the Headquarter has fallen in disarray, and we are at a loss of what to do...” Seeing the serious and enraged look on Stirling’s face, he dared not to continue. Instantly, the room lapsed into an awkward silence.

Stirling suppressed his anger and turned to Eeling: “What about on your end? Do you need help?”

Standing a few feet away, Eeling listened closely and replied in a low voice: “Sir, we are mostly fine, but there is a decision we have to make right now. Do we defend or retreat? We are all waiting on the decision from the First Commander, but the way Sir Ming Hui is now...” Stirling thought about it for a moment, then asked Qin Lu who came with him: “I need you to write it down.”

When Qin Lu was ready, Stirling spoke slowly, one word at the time: “Due to the former Far Eastern Front First Commander, Sir Ming Hui’s deteriorating mental and physical condition, I, Central Army Commander Stirling, believe that he is no longer fit to remain in his current position. Under paragraph 2 of article 32 of Rules of Combat, as the highest active ranking officer, I shall assume Sir Ming Hui’s duties and take over the command of all House ZiChuan’s armies operating in the Far Eastern Regions. –Stirling, Imperial Calendar, Year 780, January 8th.”

Stirling continued: “Make two additional copies of it. One stays with the Far Eastern Headquarters, one stays with the Central Army and send the last one to

the High Command. Does anyone have any objections?”

Everyone shook their heads, including the officers from the Black Banner Army and the officers from the province of Iriya: “No objections! We are willing to follow your command, Sir.”

“Good, listen up.” Stirling turned towards the Deputy Commander of the Black Banner Army: “What is your name?”

“I’m Lan Qi, rank...”

“Ok. Hereby, you have been promoted to the Acting Commander of the Black Banner Army.”

Lan Qi startled for a second, then smiled with joy: “Thank you Sir! I will not disappoint you! I will do my utmost...”

“Lan Qi, how many men does the Black Banner Army have left?”

“Sir, we have lost all contact with the rest of our units. We only have the security guards of the Headquarters here...”

“Take the guards with you and go out there. You have my order to gather all the able soldiers in the city. I don’t care which unit they are from and what rank they used to hold, they are now all part of the Black Banner Army. I’m giving you the full authority to reorganize them as you see fit. Once you are done, ask Eeling for the weapons. I do not want to see a single able man wandering about on the street after dark. If they refuse, you have the right to execute them on the spot! I will place my Constable Corp under your command as well!”

Moved by Stirling’s determined and steadfast tone, Lan Qi saluted with military precision: “Yes, Sir!” As he left the room, Stirling turned to instruct Qin Lu: “Assign a platoon from my personal guards to escort Sir Ming Hui to Fort Warren.”

Qin Lu understood exactly Stirling meant, rather than 'to escort' it was more like 'under escort'. Qin Lu left the room and came back with a few tough looking guards. Meanwhile, Stirling turned to Ming Hui and said: “Sir, your escorts are here!”

Ming Hui watched him eyes wide with fear, whispering: “No... please...” He

huddled even further back into that filthy corner, as if it was the only place he felt safe.

Stirling couldn't bear to look at him anymore. He gestured at the guards, telling them to take him outside.

Ming Hui cried miserably: "Please don't! I don't want to die! Don't take me away! Don't send me back! Don't!"

Stirling said blankly: "Tell them, to treat Sir Ming Hui with care!" and averted his gaze, unwilling to look at Ming Hui's sorry state. As the guards were forced to drag him away, all the officers in the room couldn't help but feel sympathy for the man. Everyone realized then, he would never again be that popular Commander they used to know. What awaited him at Fort Warren was the executioner's blade.

Stirling sat down and asked Eeling: "How many men do you have?"

The terrified looks on Ming Hui's face, when he was being dragged away, were still fresh on Eeling's mind. Startled a bit, he hurriedly answered: "Sir, province of Iriya used to have over seventy-thousand garrison forces, but now I only have thirty-thousand left. I have lost contact with the rest of my men..." "That is enough!" Stirling interrupted him: "I need you to send scouting parties to both the north and the south. Their primary mission is to find out how far the Demon's advancing forces have gotten, and where the bulk of their armies are. If possible, capture a Demon alive. Also, I want you to gather your men and assign a few battalions to maintain the order in the city. Furthermore, commandeer all the wagons, I don't care who owns them, military or non-military, I want them all!"

"Yes, Sir!" Memorizing every word, Eeling left swiftly to execute his orders.

Times when the situation was most dire, was when they needed a strong, confident and reliable leader the most. Feeling reassured, all the officers briskly returned to their post and began the preparations. The chaos in the Headquarters had stopped. Patrols once again appeared on the streets maintaining order; large groups of defeated soldiers wandering about were getting organized; one after another, scouting parties were being dispatched in every direction, hoping to gather more intelligence on the enemy. Slowly, but



surely, the preparations for battle were being made.

At nightfall, cheers and joyous laughter rose from outside the Headquarters: "We caught a prisoner! A Demon prisoner!"

Stirling was very excited about the news, he even praised Eeling for doing a good job. Given the gravity of the situation, Stirling wished to interrogate the prisoner himself. Amongst the soldiers in the garrison forces, a few of the officers spoke the demon language, and were asked to be the interpreters for the interrogation.

As it turned out, it wasn't too hard getting the Demon soldier to talk. He was practically in shock. The mere threats of torture was enough to make him spill the beans. One of the officer asked: "What's your name?"

The Demon Soldier answered a few words in his tongue and the interpreters translated: "Mu Juce."

"What is your rank in the Demon's Army?"

The Demon soldier responded: "Caramé." The interpreters explained: "Sir. That is like a common soldier." Stirling seemed disappointed. He wouldn't be able to extract much information from someone like that.

"When did you join the army? And why?"

"This autumn. In response to the command of our supreme God King."

"Why is the Demon Army attacking us?"

"His Majesty says, there is a great evil amongst the Humans. His name is Di Lin. He slaughtered our children and bled our people. House ZiChuan even killed our beautiful and gorgeous flower, Princess Ka Dan. It is a debt that must be paid in full!"

"Where did you come from? What did you do before joining the army?"

"I was a farmer in the Quqilin area."

Stirling started to lose his patience, he interjected: "How many troops did the Demon Empire deploy?"

The officer translated his message. The prisoner flapped his arms like a bird

while muttering a few unintelligible words. The interpreter turned to Stirling, saying: “Sir, he says he doesn’t know exactly, but there are so many of them like the birds flying over the mountain.”

“How many from his village joined the army with him?”

“He says he doesn’t know the exact number either, but the recruitment started in the spring last year. From their village alone, one out of every seven males has joined the army. Probably more in the cities.”

Stirling asked: “Ask him, is the Demon God King with the army? Is he still here?”

The answer came surprisingly fast: “His Majesty is here.”

Stirling took a deep breath, standing up and said: “All right, you may continue the interrogation.”

He had left the room, but thoughts of today’s event were still running in the back of his mind: The situation is obvious. The Demon Empire has planned this attack for a long time! They were watching us while we fought the Rebel Army, waiting until we have exhausted our resources and manpower. Then they chose the icy winter, the season when the Demons are at their strongest, to attack us. Under the leadership of the Invincible Demon God King, and through a series of lightning fast attacks, the Demon Empire wished to crush House ZiChuan’s defences in one fell swoop! No matter whether it was the timing, tactics or strategies, everything was flawless. It was the perfect plan. In Stirling’s memories of the Demons, they were supposed to be a bunch of brutes who knew nothing but charging straight into the battle, and running away at the first sight of trouble. When did they become so clever all of a sudden?

Eeling approached him, saying: “Sir, our scouts have returned from the north and the south. In both directions, we have spotted large amount of Demon Forces heading west approximately a hundred miles from our current position. The scouts couldn’t find a way to get past them.”

Stirling calmly asked: “How many?”

Eeling’s face paled as he answered: “Too many. We can’t be certain, but they are everywhere.”

“Tell the scout Captains to get in here. I want to ask them myself.”

The questioning only took half an hour. The situation was getting more dangerous by the second. Demon’s Forces had been sighted in the province of Yun, Minske, Sha Jia, Dusa and even in the province of Wargo far behind the frontlines. The red arrow representing the two provinces still in the hands of the Human defenders were caught in the middle of two larger black arrows. Like an egg caught between the pincers, it could be crushed at any moment. But why didn’t they attack the Central Army stationed in the province of Iriya? It only took a brief moment, and Stirling had found the answer. The Demon Empire wished to surround us from all side, and swallow the several million civilians and soldiers in one giant gulp!”

Stirling instantly declared: “We cannot defend this city anymore! Eeling, take your men and prepare the evacuation for all the residents in the province of Deja and Iriya! Be swift and get it done before they can complete the encirclement!”

Eeling protested: “Sir, I have less than thirty-thousand men. It is going to take two weeks at least to evacuate several millions of civilians. The Demons will never let us escape...”

“Move as fast as possible! Save as many as you can! The Central Army will cover your rear.”

Eeling thought: that is not enough either! The Demons have come in force, how is the Central Army going to cover such a wide area of attacks with only so few of them? Noticing the anxiety and urgency in Stirling’s hoarse voice, he didn’t ask and did as he was instructed.

Bong! Bong! the powerful gong resounded again and again, through the night sky of the city, signalling the full scale evacuation of all civilians in the province of Iriya.

Qin Lu in charge of the interrogation came out and informed Stirling: “Sir, the prisoner told us the location of the Demon God King. The Imperial entourage has made camp at the Maple Forest in the province of Dusa.”

“Very good! Summon all the Division Leaders, I have orders to give.”

Qin Lu complied without question. In less than ten minutes, twenty of Central

Army's Division Leaders had gathered. Stirling walked amongst them, speaking loudly: "The time is of the essence. I want everyone to return to your unit this instant! Prepare your men for battle! We depart in two hours!"

The Division Leaders shared a look with each other. Most of them only just got here; the soldiers barely had any time to rest, and they had to march out again? Finally, it was the third Division Leader, Wen He who asked the question everyone was dying to ask: "Sir, if I may. Where are we headed?"

Stirling spoke in a clear voice: "We are going to kill the Demon God King!"

Ba-thumb, someone fell from his chair backwards...

# Purple River - Chapter 8.6

## Chapter 08 Part 06 - Demons

Forward! Towards the West! On the meandering Great Road of the Far East, an endless line of Demons marched westwards, crossing the province of Minske. The army in question was no other than the victor of the plain of Moon Bay, General Rudy's army. Everywhere the eyes could see, a sea of banners swayed in the wind, while spears and blades shined even brighter than the snow itself. The new and mighty conqueror of the Far Eastern Regions marched proudly under the daylight.

Standing on top of a hill adjacent to the long road, Duke Rudy gazed upon his mighty army. In that instant, a feeling of overwhelming power washed over him. I have the mightiest army under my command. With it, I will destroy the indestructible, impenetrable Fort Warren. I will make the Great Empire bow before me, I will conquer the whole world, I will pile up the bodies of Humans onto a mountain, and use them as stepping stones to ascend to Greatness!

Seemingly catching on to his thoughts, the General of the Imperial Guards - Yun Qian Xue smiled: "What a great army! Your Grace is truly the greatest!" Even though his words were nothing but praises, the way Yun Qian Xue said it, half seriously and with a mysterious and never-ending smile, Rudy couldn't tell whether that cynical and pretty-faced fellow was really praising him or mocking him.

Rudy was a lowborn. He always had an inferiority complex to the likes of Yun Qian Xue, who was educated and a member of the royal family. The more inferior he felt, the more arrogant he behaved. He would constantly remind everyone of his overdeveloped muscles and many terrible scars, in an atten Xue

quickly averted his gaze, concealing his laughter from him.

Recollecting himself, Yun Qian Xue spoke abruptly: "Your Grace, obtaining the opening victory on the plains of Moon Bay has greatly boosted the Empire's morale. His Majesty is most pleased!"

When the name of the Supreme God King was mentioned, even the disrespectful Rudy dared not ignore him. Besides, the man in front of him, the Imperial General, had the Emperor's favour, and was a close confidant to the "Mad Dog". All the more reason to get on his good side. Trying very hard to sound modest, Rudy spoke: "It is all thanks to His Majesty's great wisdom..."

"However, although you have annihilated an entire House ZiChuan's army, you have failed to kill the enemy general, Fang Jin, robbing the Empire of a total victory. His Majesty was not pleased with the result. He even said: "I thought Rudy was a capable general, who would have thought he'd turn out to be so useless?!"

"Just enough; exactly how I wanted." Yun Qian Xue watched Rudy's reddened cheeks in satisfaction. Even that thick layer of rough hair on his face could not hide his anger. "I just made that up for you. His Majesty didn't even bother to react to the report, less so feeling displeased about it. I doubt a wild bear like you would dare confront his Majesty about it."

Rudy roared furiously: "General Yun, I told you a thousand times! We definitely killed Fang Jin. I can show you his uniform and the Commander's golden star epaulet!"

"I saw but a headless body." Yun Qian Xue responded calmly.

"But that is..."

"How are you going to prove to His Majesty that it was indeed Fang Jin's body?"

"The uniform and the epaulet..."

"Perhaps the cunning Fang Jin gave his uniform to a fellow soldier while he was long gone. The Humans are all despicable cowards. Isn't that what you keep telling me?"

“But that was really...”

“I know, and I believe you. The question is, how do you make His Majesty believe you?”

No matter how much Rudy stamped with rage, that shallow smile never once left Yun Qian Xue’s face. As Yun Qian Xue picked softly at the petals of a wildflower in his hand, it made Rudy absolutely furious. There were hundreds of thousands of heads rolling about, the size of a small mountain. How was he supposed to find the head of a man he had never met?! If that annoying pretty face wasn’t the envoy of the Emperor but a subordinate of his, he would have cut him down where he stood!

After having a little bit of fun, Yun Qian Xue spoke casually: “Well, there is always a way...”

“Really?” Rudy instantly calmed down, waiting patiently for the next set of words to come out of Yun Qian Xue’s mouth. Yun Qian Xue stared at the sky, at the ground, at the trees on the side of the road and at the flowers growing in the grass, anything but the words Rudy wanted to hear. Every movement, every facial expression he made spoke only one thing: “Beg me!”

Rudy asked reluctantly: “General Yun, why aren’t you saying anything?”

“Oh!” As if he just noticed someone was standing beside him, Yun Qian Xue looked to the sky and said: “The weather sure is great today!”

Rudy smiled dryly in agreement: “Hehe. Yes, indeed.”

empt to overcome the grace of others that he did not possess and of which he was incredibly jealous, with his own brutishness. Ignoring him, Rudy sneered pompously to the sky, as if he hadn’t heard a word Yun Qian Xue just said.

As an envoy from the Emperor, Yun Qian Xue was quite handsome. Despite his refined scholarly upbringing, he did have a bit of manliness customary of a soldier. He was born into the House of Yun, a famous household known for having produced many generations of excellent generals and which was considered as the famous House amongst all famous Houses of the Demon Empire. Unlike many, Yun Qian Xue's own performance had lived up to the name of the House, and was regarded as the elite of this generation of Royal children.

He was often praised for his poise and demeanor, even by the Emperor, who had promised to betroth his beloved daughter to him. If it wasn't for Princess Ka Dan's untimely death during the previous encounter with House ZiChuan, Yun Qian Xue would have been a prince by now. Even so, the Emperor still favoured him greatly, promoting him to the Commander of the Guard Brigade, the Imperial General.

Seeing Rudy's rudeness, Yun Qian Xue laughed instead of showing his anger. Before he came here, the Second Prince, Kalan had told him: "Rudy is infamous for three things, barbarism, ruthlessness, and..." Kalan purposely stopped for a second. "He is unbelievably ugly!" Looking at him from an angle, Rudy had a monkey-like face, bull-like ears, dog-like nose, fish-like eyes, ram-like horns, horse-like neck, bear-like body and a pig-like brain. Yun Qia

"The view is nice too!"

"Hoho. Yes, of course."

Yun Qian Xue rambled on: "The Far East is such a beautiful place; it should have been ours ages ago. Damn those thieves of House ZiChuan! How dare they keep it from us for so long! They cannot be forgiven! No matter, His Majesty is the God reborn. We will soon conquer the world! It won't be long now, the day the radiance of..."

Yun Qian Xue was getting sidetracked, talking about this and that in a drawn out fashion, lasting over half an hour. All the while Rudy stood beside him, too afraid to interrupt. He could only stomp his feet in frustration. Finally, while Yun Qian Xue was catching his breath, he hastily asked: "What about the thing you were talking about earlier?"

"What did I say?" Yun Qian Xue asked perplexed: "The part where we are going to conquer the world?"

"Erm, no. Before that."

"Oh! The part about House ZiChuan, and that we are going to destroy them."

"A little bit before that."

"You mean the part about how great His Majesty is. Why, Your Grace does not agree?"



Rudy jumped, explaining himself in a hurry: “Of course I do. I’m His Majesty’s most loyal servant...”

“Yes. I’m sure His Majesty will be happy to know you have been very loyal. Now that my mission here is at an end, I shall bid my farewell. I sincerely wish Your Grace to be ever victorious in your upcoming battles!” With that, Yun Qian Xue was getting ready to leave.

Rudy had to plea: “Please wait, General Yun. You were saying earlier, that there may be a way...”

Rudy purposely stopped there, hoping Yun Qian Xue would finish the rest of the sentence. Somehow, Yun Qian Xue seemed to have forgotten all about it, not saying a word. Rudy had no choice, and was forced to continue: “I hope you can teach me the ways. Rudy will forever be in your debt.”

“Oh! About that! You should have asked me sooner, Your Grace. I almost forgot all about it!” Yun Qian Xue smiled on the inside: “It is simple, Your Grace. The problem right now is that you can’t find Fang Jin’s head, correct?”

“That is right.”

“Then don’t! You have his epaulet and uniform. All you need to do is to grab any human head, and say that you have killed him!”

“But, but that would be deceiving the Emperor. It is a serious offence!”

“Haha, Your Grace must be tired! Think about it for a second. Who has really seen the face of Fang Jin in the palace? Marquis Halcyon is the only one who could recognize him. As long as he is willing to vouch for you, saying: “Yes, that is indeed Commander Fang Jin!” Who else could possibly refute him?”

“Marquis Halcyon? That treacherous dog?” Rudy’s voice was filled with contempt hearing the mention of that name: “But why would he lie for me?”

“Haha. You are wrong again, Your Grace! Didn’t you tell me that Fang Jin is definitely dead? So how is it a lie? As a subject to the Emperor, it is your duty to please His Majesty. No one can fault you for that!”

“I understand, but I have never been a friend to Marquis Halcyon. Why would he help me?”

“Well, Your Grace need not worry, because Marquis Halcyon is a great admirer of the Second Prince. If His Highness gives the word, I’m sure Marquis Halcyon will agree.”

The Second Prince was Kalan, the second son of the Demon God King and a reckless madman who often indulged in wine and women. The Demons called him the “Mad Prince” in public, and the “Mad Dog” in private. For some strange reason, Yun Qian Xue, a famous general with great prospects and blessed with royal blood, refused to serve the First Prince - Kadun. Instead he was incredibly close to the Mad Dog – Kalan.

Hearing Kalan’s name, Rudy blurted the word: “The Mad Dog?!”

Yun Qian Xue’s eyes instantly turned cold and his expression turned lethal. Rudy could feel his heart freezing as he quivered uncontrollably under his icy glare.

Yun Qian Xue hastily suppressed his killing intent, thinking to himself: How dare you insult His Highness in front of me?! Had you done so a year ago, I would have killed you where you stand! Rudy, you may act arrogant all you want, but if you make me your enemy, I can take your head within twenty moves! Luckily for you, by His Highness’ orders, you will get to live for a while longer...

Yun Qian Xue cracked a smile, saying: “As you said, Your Grace. You are not well acquainted with the Second Prince, but His Highness has heard much about you and your bravery. He has always hoped to befriend a brave warrior such as yourself, Your Grace! As a token of goodwill, His Highness is willing to let Marquis Halcyon vouch for you, no strings attached.”

Rudy had yet to recover from the assault to his senses earlier. What was that sudden feeling of terror all about? Was it an overwhelming killing intent? How is that possible? I’ve been through hundreds of battles. I’ve killed countless enemies. I’m the mighty General Rudy. How could I possibly feel threatened by a meek looking pretty boy like him?! Was I mistaken? Right, I had to be. Perhaps the days are getting colder, I should wear another coat.

Regarding Yun Qian Xue’s suggestion, he was still considering it. Even though Rudy was a brute, he knew that deceiving the Emperor was a grave offence, especially since the Emperor was the wisest being he had ever known. If his lie

was ever discovered...

Yun Qian Xue didn't try to pressure him. He laughed: "I didn't know Your Grace was such an honest man. I'm truly impressed! If Your Grace is not interested in claiming your prize, then forget I said anything. I heard that in the south, General Ling Buxu killed many enemies as well. I'm sure he would be interested."

The effect was almost instantaneous. The mere thought of letting everything he had fought so hard for, the big prize of killing the enemy General, fall into the hands of that hateful Ling Buxu... was enough to make him fume. He argued: "Wait, hold on! General Yun, I will do as you say! Please let His Highness know that I will be forever grateful!"

"Haha. As I said, His Highness has great respect for you! We are all friends now. I promise you, His Highness is always true to his word!" Yun Qian Xue smiled, thinking: different baits for different fish. For an angry bear like you, haha, the best way is to dangle a piece of honey in front of your face. His Highness is truly wise. Is there anything he can't foresee in this world? Rudy, once you take the honey, you will have to dance at the whims of His Highness for the rest of your life!

"Hehe." Rudy laughed dryly, seemingly realizing something was amiss: Since when did he become a friend with that pretty face?

Yun Qian Xue didn't give him time to think, speaking promptly: "Very well. Shall we start drafting the letter for the Emperor? I will deliver it and the rest of the evidence to His Majesty right away. In case someone tries to steal what is rightfully yours!"

Rudy didn't hesitate as he began drafting the letter. In it, he detailed how he had killed the enemy Commander – Fang Jin with his bare hands and crushed House ZiChuan's Army with minimal casualties on the plain of Moon Bay, then handed all the evidence to Yun Qian Xue.

Yun Qian Xue took a glance at the letter, smiling ominously: With his handwritten letter, I now have proof of his treachery! Naturally, as long as he behaves nicely, there is no need for me to ever play this card.

Though at the same time, Yun Qian Xue felt a little bit sad for having to manipulate a brainless bear like him. It was a job beneath him. As a General, his

biggest wish was to face off against a powerful enemy on the battlefield.

Yun Qian Xue gazed towards the distant west, praying silently: “Di Lin... Before I exact my revenge, you better not lose to anyone else! Or I will not be able to live with myself! But before I defeat you, I will first take down one of your equals, Stirling. His death will summon forth our destined battle! You better not disappoint me! Di Lin!”

A mounted courier suddenly came into view below the hillside, heading directly towards them. Rudy’s guard instinctively stepped forward to stop him. Seeing the urgent expression on this courier drenched in sweat, Yun Qian Xue turned to Rudy, saying: “Your Grace, we should let him through!”

With a simple gesture from Rudy, the guards quickly moved aside. Rushing forth, the courier dismounted and dropped down to one knee: “Your Grace, I have an urgent report!”

Rudy sneered: “Speak!”

“The Human’s Central Army has launched a large scale counter attack. Their army has crossed the River of Grey Waters and defeated three of our forces, over seventeen divisions, in the process! Baron Mu Yinan was killed! Stirling’s army is closing in on the Maple forest where His Majesty is currently staying!”

The news came as a shock to both Rudy and Yun Qian Xue, but it was Yun Qian Xue who asked first: “Is His Majesty safe? How many men does Stirling have?”

“His Majesty is fine, but Stirling’s Army is very powerful. The rumors say he has succeeded the First Commander of the Far Eastern Front. He is now in charge of all the Human Armies operating in the Far East, over five-hundred-thousand men in total!”

Rudy and Yun Qian Xue shared a look, sensing the fear in each other’s eyes. In order to crush the remaining Human resistance, during the last high ranking war council, the head advisor, Mr. Heisha devised a massive encirclement plan spanning across seven provinces. The goal was the total annihilation of the remnants of the Human forces stationed in the province of Deja and Iriya. And the plan was to deploy the Demon Army and the Rebel Army, a massive force totalling over two million men, to the seven adjacent provinces.

The initial intelligence suggested that the Human Forces totalled five-hundred-thousand at most. After the first wave of attacks, there shouldn't have been much of it left. The fact that Stirling still had such a large force at his disposal came as a huge surprise! Now with the Demon Forces spread thin all over the region, they now faced the risk of being divided and conquered by the much more mobile forces of Stirling.

Even worse, Stirling's goal seemed to His Majesty himself! At this very moment, the Emperor's entourage was protected by two-hundred-thousand Guards at most. If the Tiger of ZiChuan was really as terrifying as the rumors say...

Rudy thundered: "That damned Marquis Halcyon! What kind of bogus intelligence did he feed us?! He was completely wrong about the size of House ZiChuan's army! I will skin him alive if I ever see him again! And Advisor Heisha, always acting as if he was the smartest one in the room, what a great plan that turned out to be!"

Leaping onto his horse, Yun Qian Xue remained silent. A fiery will burned brightly in his heart: Tiger of ZiChuan, you did not disappoint me! Come, you are mine!

Seeing Yun Qian Xue leaving, Rudy hastily asked: "General Yun, what should I do? Do I keep marching west as planned, or..."

"Your Grace, you are the Commander of this army. You must make that decision yourself! This is an urgent situation, I must go!" Accompanied by a score of Imperial Guards, Yun Qian Xue rode forth like a swift wind, leaving a trail of sand stirring in the air.

As Yun Qian Xue's shadow vanished in the mist of sand, Rudy began to think: What do I do? Unlike Yun Qian Xue and the other royalties, the reason Rudy could rise from the bottom all the way to the high rank of a Duke and the Commander of an Army, was because he was relentless, ruthless and fiercely loyal to the Demon God King. Coming up with ideas and plans were not his forte; he was much better when he had a clear instruction or plan to follow.

But now the situation had changed. He couldn't ask the Emperor; he couldn't ask the two Princes; he couldn't even ask the Head Advisor Heisha for

instructions. Rudy had no choice but to resort to his already lackluster brain: What do I do? Keep going or turn back?

Perhaps it was a miracle or eagerness that led to his inspiration as an idea suddenly popped into Rudy's head. Isn't this the perfect chance to prove myself to the Emperor? If I can defeat the famous Tiger of ZiChuan, I'll have truly distinguished myself! I can kill a million runaways or civilians, but none of it matters when compared to having defeated Stirling! Besides, if I'm lucky...

Images of glorious battles swirled inside Rudy's mind as he laughed, gritted his teeth, and tensed up in rapid succession. His guards all stared at him with unease: Is he going mad? I hope he doesn't lash out on me!

"Listen up!" Rudy had made up his mind. Fort Warren was not going to fly away. He could

always attack it later if necessary, but the chance to rescue His Majesty was a once in a lifetime opportunity. It would be such a shame if he was to let it slip through his fingers!

Rudy gave the order: "Inform all units, we are going to turn around and head for the Maple Forest!" A long line of Demons began to turn as ordered, converting rearguards into vanguards, marching in the direction from whence they came.

Rudy praised himself softly under his breath: I'm simply too clever! A lesser man wouldn't have come up with such a smart idea! No one will dare to call me all brawn and no brain ever again after I cut off the head of Stirling! I have to keep my army's movements a secret. I can't let the other forces get ahead of me and take away my prize, or all will be for naught!

What he didn't realize however, was that almost all of the Demon Generals had come to the same conclusion: It was a golden opportunity to prove themselves to the Emperor!

Perhaps it was the chance to prove their loyalty, or perhaps it was the chance to defeat the famous Tiger of ZiChuan, or perhaps they were genuinely concerned about His Majesty's safety. Either way, all the Demon Generals heading deep behind House ZiChuan's lines decided to turn around, making a headlong dash towards the province of Dusa, hoping to be first to defeat the

Central Army and cut off Stirling's head.

Head Advisor Heisha fumed with rage underneath his veil. A perfect encirclement plan went up in smokes before it even began. He stomped his feet, screaming: "Back! Go back!" But how could the generals let go of what was soon to be theirs: an ambitious dream to be the champion who rescued the Emperor! They waited patiently, staring over the horizon. Like pining for the return of their loved ones, they waited in anguish, hoping for Stirling to show up, sighing profusely: "Stirling, where art thou?"

And for that reason, a total of four million civilians from the province of Deja and Iriya barely made it out of the encirclement of the Demon Armies, escaping to the core regions behind Fort Warren. Imperial Calendar, Year 780, January 21st, a group of three-hundred-thousand civilians, the last group of refugees, made it safely to Fort Warren. Less than ten miles away from their position, twenty thousand Far Eastern Garrison Forces, tasked with covering the retreat, engaged the Demon Army led by General Ling Buxu in a fighting withdrawal. He was the first one to continue the pursuit of the Human Refugees. During the battle, Red Banner Master Eeling was killed, and was promoted to Deputy Commander posthumously by the High Command. With Deputy Commander Lin Bing's help, the rest of Eeling's forces all managed to retreat into Fort Warren.

Meanwhile, Stirling's Army remained in the province of Dusa, a place nearly a thousand kilometers away from Fort Warren, distracting the Demon Army's attention. Surrounding him in a radius of a hundred kilometers, over a million Demon-and Rebel Forces had gathered, and more were arriving constantly every day...

# Purple River - Chapter 8.7

## Chapter 08 Part 07 – Counter Attack

Stirling's Army started the attack on the Demon encampment. Shortly after midnight, ten-thousand heavy cavalries had seized the Vaga crossing, tearing several thousand Demon defenders to pieces. At the same time, next to their forgotten corpses, five pontoon bridges were assembled over the surface of the River of Grey Waters, allowing the massive infantry divisions to swiftly cross the greatest river in the Far Eastern Region. By dawn, Stirling's forces had appeared undetected on the eastern bank of the River, outside the walls of City - Payi.

Baron Mu Yinan's forces spent the whole night celebrating; the constant victories had made the Demon General complacent, not even a single guard stood watch that night. Under the cover of darkness, large groups of Human infantrymen snuck over the walls of the slumbering city. The endless arrowheads of their spears flashed brilliantly in the dark, like stars in the clear night sky. The soldiers quickly took control of all the important crossroads in the city, capturing both of the city gates. Five thousand longbows were strung, aiming directly at the gates of the Demon Encampment inside the city.

Finally, with everything set, Stirling gave the order: "Go!" Soldiers dumped the oil and an array of burning torches was flung over the wooden palisades. Instantly, the entire Demon's Camp was drowned in fire. Some of the Demon soldiers who were more sober than the rest managed to escape the sea of flames, dashing out of the gates, shouting: "What is going on?" The answer came in the form of several arrows that pierced their skull.

Over twenty thousand Demon died in the fire that night, and the lucky ones who didn't, found themselves surrounded by hundreds of angry Human soldiers



wielding sharpened blades. Stirling did not intend for the massacre to happen, but nothing he said worked. Even the few Division Leaders who agreed to stop would secretly encourage their soldiers: “Kill them all!” In the end, Stirling had to send out his personal guards to get the Demons out from under the butcher knives of his own men. Those dozen Demons were the last survivor of Baron Mu Yinan’s unit.

From the mouths of the prisoners, Stirling found out about the imminent arrival of another Demon Army, a group of three divisions, over ten thousand men. They were meant to join Mu Yinan’s forces in the City of Payi, and were supposed to arrive later today. The valuable information couldn’t have come at a more opportune time. Stirling immediately gave the order to put out the fire in the Demon’s Camp, but most importantly, to preserve the Military Warehouses where their uniforms and armors were stored...

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As it turned out, the prisoner did not tell the whole truth, the arriving army was not a small group of three divisions, but a large group of ten infantry divisions led by Demon General Ora! When the long line of marching Demons arrived at the gate of Payi, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Soon, the gate was raised, and a few lazy guards stood on both sides of the gate, basking under the sun. Everything seemed as they should, except the few wisps of black smoke rising in the distance, and the stench of burnt flesh in the air... But that was normal too, especially in the regions recently conquered by the Great Demon Army.

General Ora frowned: Seriously? Hasn't Mu Yinan had enough fun yet? What is there left for us to do if he kills all the human prisoners? Feeling slightly annoyed, he never once noticed the odd expressions showing on the Demon Guards standing near the gate. By regulation, Ora was supposed to send out scouting parties before entering a city. Perhaps it was due to being away from the frontline and in Demon controlled territory, or the fact that ever since the start of this war, the powerful Demon Army had yet to face any serious challenge, either way, Ora ended up making the same mistake Mu Yinan made by bypassing the army regulation. And thus, over thirty-thousand unsuspecting Demons began marching into the city in loose formation, laughing, smiling; some even

left their weapons on the back of their horses.

Seeing as General Ora himself was coming through the gate, and the terrible massacre was about to repeat itself, a patriotic Demon prisoner finally mustered his courage, yelling: "General Ora! It is a tr..."

Suddenly, a swift arrow came out of nowhere piercing the soldier's throat, felling him before he could make another sound. Chaos broke out. While the Demons were still trying to find the assassin, the heavy gears had churned, turning the huge city gate into a meat grinder as it was dropped right on top of several Demon riders, crushing them into a pulp. General Ora, barely avoiding the same terrible state, shouted angrily: "What is going on up there?! You almost got me killed! Raise the bloody gate now! Or I will send an arrow through your..." Before he could finish, another arrow came, killing him where he stood.

In an instant, row after row of archers lined up on top of the walls, unleashing a storm of arrows upon the unsuspecting Demon soldiers from General Ora's unit, dropping men and horses alike. The sudden closing of the gate cut the Demon forces in half. Without their General, the Demon Army fell into disarray, unable to decide whether they should fight or retreat. Inside the city, the same massacre continued. From every direction, Human soldiers appeared on the rooftops and behind the corridors, attacking the Demon soldiers with arrows, spears and sabres. Standing in the middle of the streets, with no cover hide behind, the Demon forces were quickly routed into a panicked retreat, scattering in all directions deeper into the streets of the city, where another set of traps were laying in wait.

The second in command of Ora's forces was a bit slow on the draw; Still thinking it was all a big misunderstanding, he shouted loudly: "Stop attacking! We are friendlies!" The result was another downpour of arrows and a wave of laughter. Finally, he realized what was going on: Shit! They are Humans! The humiliation of being made a fool of blinded his senses and made him give the order: "Attack! Kill them all!" forcing his already weakened army to scale the walls. The only outcome of such ill-prepared and forced attack was leaving another several thousand corpses behind in front of the walls, which also cost them the opportunity to retreat. By the time he had realized something was amiss, earth shook from beneath him as an expanse of black armored heavy

cavalry emerged from the forest behind him, surging forth like a tidal wave... Not many Demons from Ora's unit survived the battle, and none from the ones who were trapped inside the city.

Less than twenty-four hours, Stirling had defeated three groups of Demon forces, totalling over forty thousand men, but that was not enough. In order to really get his message across, Stirling divided his force into several smaller groups, instructing each of them to carry more banners!

The officers protested: "Sir, we don't have that many banners!"

Stirling replied impatiently: "Who says they have to be real banners? Just find a stick and a piece of cloth!"

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Everywhere they went, the sea of banners brought fear to the heart of every demon along the road. According to Human Army Custom, each battalion was only to have one Bannerbearer. The number of Stirling's Banners... well, was simply too many to count for the few Demons frantically trying to escape.

If they only knew, the moment after the sun had set in the west, the impressive Army of Stirling immediately grabbed their fake banners and ran back to the City of Payi. In the few days after the battle, Stirling's forces flaunted their banners in the exact same fashion, purposely making themselves visible to the Demon scouts.

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Before long, a flurry of reports arrived at the Demon Headquarters, each of them describing the same terrible truth. A large Human Army was on the move, sweeping towards them. After each subsequent report, the size of Stirling's Army multiplied, from the initial a hundred-thousand to two, three, even four-hundred thousand... and kept increasing...

In addition, according to the latest reports, the massive Army of Stirling was headed directly towards the Emperor's entourage staying in the Maple Forest! Yet, the whereabouts of Stirling's Army made every Demon General scratch their heads as no one could ever pinpoint the exact location of the bulk of Stirling's seemingly overwhelming forces!

Ultimately, all the sightings could only lead to one logical conclusion and served to further prove the devious nature of the Human Army. Stirling had to be lurking somewhere in a nearby forest, waiting to ambush the Emperor's entourage. It was a well known tactic in the Human's book, the Art of War, to cut off the head of the snake! Kill the enemy leaders first, incite chaos, then divide and conquer!

"As expected from the Tiger of ZiChuan, he is very cunning indeed! Luckily we have seen through his petty tricks; we will not fall for his traps!" Commander of the Guard Brigade in charge of Emperor's safety, Duke Leo beseeched in earnest: "Your Majesty, right now, Stirling's Army has the advantage in numbers. There is no need to put your safety at risk. If I may be so bold, perhaps Your Majesty should retreat..."

The God King smiled with pride, saying: "We do not shy away from anyone."

All his subjects praised in unison: "Hail to the Emperor! The God King shall reign supreme! Stirling stands no chance against our mighty Army. He is digging his own grave!"

Amidst the singing of praises, the mysterious black cloaked and veiled Head Advisor, Heisha whispered from behind: "Your Majesty, what if it was Duke Zuo Jia Ming?"

The Demon God King turned towards him, whispering so softly only Heisha could hear: "Even if it was Duke Zuo Jia Ming himself, I would cut him down just the same."

The God King smiled. His imposing blue eyes was as unpredictable as the vast ocean and as hazy as the mist on a winter's dawn. They were simply magnificent.

# Purple River - Chapter 8.8

## Chapter 08 Part 08 – Night Raid

The Demon's worries were unfounded. Stirling might be mad, but he would never send the Central Army alone to engage the Guard Brigade, the elite of Demon's Forces. Besides, behind the two-hundred-thousand Demons and Armored Beasts, there was still the invincible Demon God King to contend with.

His original plan was to create a series of disturbance along the borders of province of Dusa and distract the Demon's Attention, then retreat before the converging lines of the Demon Forces could cut off his escape. He was convinced that the Demon God King would never risk his own safety and attack first. Four days had passed; the fierce Guard Brigade of the Demon God King did not show up. His gamble seemed to have paid off. Stirling sighed in relief, instructing his men: "Abandon the City of Payi, prepare to retreat." But then, the Imperial Guards led by the Demon General, Yun Qian Xue appeared in the distance.

The scouts reported to Stirling: "We have sighted the Demon Army twenty-five kilometers from our current position, around fifty-thousand men." Initially, Stirling did not pay much attention to the small Demon Army. As long as it wasn't the Demon God King himself, he was confident that he could handle a force of that size with ease. In the afternoon of January 13th, the Central Army abandoned City of Payi as planned, retreating westwards. As soon as Stirling left the city, the Demon Army began closing in on his position, posturing themselves for an attack.

The Central Army hurriedly stopped the retreat and started forming defensive lines on the plains of Grey Waters, waiting patiently for the enemy to come to them. The sun rose slowly from the east horizon to the zenith; Stirling could see

the shapes of enemy forces over the distant horizon, but no attack ever came. They just stood there! Finally, it was Stirling who gave the order to attack first. The giant steel formation of infantryman in the center marched forward, and on both flanks, cavalries walked slowly at the same speed of the infantry. Stirling did not wish to waste his precious manpower and time to fight a meaningless battle. He had hoped that a sudden show of force from the Central Army was enough to deter the Demons from attacking.

As expected, seeing the powerful Central Army approaching, the Demons immediately retreated. However, as soon as the Central Army continued to retreat westwards, the Demons showed up again, posturing for another attack. When the Central Army attacked, the Demons ran away once more.

The same course of events repeated over and over again. Yun Qian Xue's Army was like an annoying dog Stirling couldn't get rid of, always following him closely behind. The moment Stirling retreated, he closed in, the moment Stirling stopped, he stopped, and the moment Stirling attacked, he ran away... Like a thorn at Stirling's side, Yun Qian Xue relentlessly pursued the Central Army, all the way to the eastern bank of Grey Waters. Stirling knew exactly what was going on. This time, he had found his match. The enemy General seemed to have guessed his plan to retreat westwards. The enemy's goal was not to defeat him, but delay. Once the enemy reinforcements arrived, they would overwhelm him with superior forces. Naturally, Stirling was also aware of the plans of the enemy General. The enemy was waiting for the Central Army to cross the river. Any half-decent General knew that an army was most vulnerable when they crossed the river. Half of his army would be trapped on one side of the river and half on the other, and his soldiers knew that as well. If the enemy attacked their rear while they were trying to cross, his lines were certainly going to crumple. The only way for the Central Army to safely make it across, was to get rid of the threat first.

Stirling ordered the bulk of his army to keep moving, while hiding in the nearby forest with the Heavy Calvary. If the enemy dared to give chase, he would hit them from both sides. Unfortunately the unusual amount of hoof prints left behind by the Heavy Cavalries gave away his plan. Instead of chasing after the Central Army, Yun Qian Xue surrounded the forest and set it alight, trapping Stirling's Heavy Cavalry in a ring of death. Luckily, Deputy Commander Qin Lu,

commanding the bulk of the army, saw the smoke. His reinforcements for Stirling arrived in time to force the Demons retreat, breaking the stranglehold of the surrounding forces.

Stirling tried to set up more traps along the way, but every time, Yun Qian Xue avoided the ambush without fail. The unexpected turn of events infuriated Stirling greatly. It wasn't because the enemy had better tactics or strategies; they merely exploited his need to retreat in a hurry. No matter what he did, what he tried, all Yun Qian Xue needed to do was to slow him down to effectively counter any of his manoeuvres. For the one hundred-thousand soldiers of the Central Army, time was of the essence, and the source of Stirling's endless worries.

Earlier today, more Demon Forces arrived. Based on the colour of their banners, it was the Rebel Army of all races. Either way, it was a sign of danger, because it meant that more and more enemy reinforcements could arrive at any moment...

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Later that night, General Yun Qian Xue of the Imperial Guards found himself kicking away the blanket as he jumped off the bed! The sudden noise outside had brought him out of his sleep.

"A night raid!" The guard came in shouting: "Sir, we are under attack!"

"Who?! How?!" Yun Qian Xue shouted angrily: "Was it Stirling's army?" He couldn't believe it; it was impossible! He had kept a close eye on the Central Army, keeping track of their every move! Not even a mosquito could escape Stirling's camp without him knowing. There was no way Stirling could have caught him unawares!

Yun Qian Xue dashed out of the tent. The camps of the rearguards were being consumed by a tornado of fire. Everywhere, alarms blazed, chaos broke out: "We are under attack! The rearguards are being overrun!"

Yun Qian Xue hastily gave the order: "Prepare my horse! Fast!" But in the midst of chaos, it wasn't exactly an easy task to find a rideable horse. In the darkness, the confused Demon Soldiers clustered around the small space between the tents, spreading the terrifying news from one to another: "The

Human Army is upon us!”

“They are here! We are surrounded!” Panic broke out everywhere. No matter how desperate the officers sounded: “Gather around me! Group up!” they couldn’t get the soldiers to organize effectively. Unable to separate friend from foe in the dark, the foot soldiers kept getting in the way of the cavalries. Noises of shouting and clattering metal had deafened the night sky. Together with a dozen of his guards, Yun Qian Xue rushed towards the source of disturbance. The only way to stop the panic from spreading was to stop it at its source.

The first sound of fighting came from the direction of the rearguards. By now, the fire had engulfed the entire rear camp, burning away all of their military supplies and wagons. After Yun Qian Xue arrived at the scene, he hastily grabbed hold of a scared officer: “What is going on? Where is the Officer on duty? I need to see him now!”

“Sir, he is already dead!”

Yun Qian Xue roared: “Who did it? Was it Stirling’s army?”

“No, Sir. It wasn’t the Central Army! The attack came from behind us! It would seem that they were Marquis Halcyon’s men!”

Yun Qian Xue couldn’t believe his ears: “Marquis Halcyon?! He would never...” This morning, a group of the Far Eastern Rebels arrived to join forces with his army. He was delighted. He even arranged for them to make camp behind his army... Who would have known...

Yun Qian Xue found it hard to believe. Did Marquis Halcyon really betray them? Since He and the Second Prince vouched for him, Marquis’ betrayal would not only affect the Second Prince’s standing in the court, even he might not escape the blame...

By then, the stables had already caught on fire. In the dim light of the burning woodwork, Yun Qian Xue could faintly make out the shapes of a group Human riders as they chased after his men.

Waking up into a nightmare, the Imperial Guards fought hard against the fierce attack of the Human Cavalry. But tried as they might, and try they did, fully armed riders versus unarmed foot soldiers, it was a slaughter.



Yun Qian Xue took control of the situation, but only a couple hundred Demon soldiers responded to his call. Gathering all the soldiers around him, he ordered the counter attack. Despite his valiant effort, his charge was quickly repelled. He tried to regroup twice more, but was defeated both times. The enemy tore through the rearguards like an unstoppable tidal wave, crashing towards the main encampment, laying fire where ever they went.

Yun Qian Xue had no choice but to call for the retreat. The faster they ran the more bodies they left behind. In the end, they could only rely on archers to provide cover for their retreat. A terrible defeat was seemingly inevitable.

Fortunately for Yun Qian Xue, the vanguards of his army, put in charge of spying on Stirling, returned in time. Already fully armed and on alert, they were able to mount an organized defence. With the support of the archers, the Demons retaliated.

The two forces collided in the dark. Their blades flashed brilliantly and constantly. Riders toppled from their horses, screaming as they hit the ground. Both sides fought like warriors trapped in the ring, trying desperately to kill their opponents. For a while, neither side came out ahead.

Yun Qian Xue had regained his calm. It wasn't time to start worrying about his standing in the court. The most important thing right now was to defeat the enemy at hand. Blood dripped from the corner of his mouth as he bit through the lip. Embarrassment and anger were the only emotions he could feel: Marquis Halcyon, you despicable dog! How dare you betray me and shame me like that?!

As he calmly analyzed the situation, he quickly realized. Even though the enemy managed to gain the upper hand by catching him off guard, their cavalries were not exactly the finest he had seen. In fact, they were not well trained at all in melee combat. During his retreat earlier, the enemy did not dare to give chase, which meant that they were not many to begin with. Despite the chaos of the situation, Yun Qian Xue was certain that in the end, the victory was his!

In every direction he pointed, he shouted and cursed at the retreating Demon soldiers, forcing them to fall back in line. Soon, a decent sized group of confused soldier had gathered around him. Under his leadership, they began to organize

and rejoin the battle.

As expected from the elite of Demon's Imperial Forces, even though they were losing only a moment earlier, with a little bit of time and a little bit of encouragement, they were able to turn the tide. Slowly, the Demons were gaining the upper hand of the battle!

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In the darkness, a courier arrived with a message: "Where is the Imperial Guard Commander? I have urgent report!"

"I'm right here! Speak!"

A fully armored courier ran towards him, reporting: "Marquis Halcyon has rebelled..." The message caused a wave of unease amongst the Demons.

"Tch!" Yun Qian Xue sneered. The news did not come as a surprise; he already guessed as much. That treacherous bastard, I'm going to cut his head off! Something suddenly caught his attention: Imperial Guard Commander? Why would a lowly courier refer to him as such? Did he not know his name?!

Leaping backwards, Yun Qian Xue instinctively pushed one of his guards in the direction of the courier running at him. Almost at the same time, like a flash of lightning, a shining blade passed before him, splitting the darkness in two. The sabre continued to slash through the waist of the Guard as if he and his armor were made of firewood, cutting him in half before his body had hit the ground. Still in mid air, Yun Qian Xue had no time to think. The awkwardness of the landing made him tumble backward. He tried to push himself back up, but the strange chill over his right shoulder startled him. Immediately, a wave of heart-tearing pain came flooding through his senses like a powerful tsunami, causing him to shriek uncontrollably... He did not manage to avoid the deadly blade after all. His entire right arm and half of his right shoulder was gone. Blood poured from his wound like falling rain as he wailed and staggered in the mud.

The horrifying shadow of the armored courier emerged from the darkness. He clearly did not expect Yun Qian Xue to be able to avoid his lethal strike, and had come to finish the job. A brave guard rushed forth, blocking the path of the assassin. A flash of blade later, the head of the guard rolled from his shoulder. Kicking away the headless body, the assassin dashed forth. Before he could take

a second step, another Demon guard grabbed his waist from behind, pulling him to a halt. From both directions, spears came thrusting, aimed at his torso. The shining sabre carved an almost perfect arc in the darkness. The invisible sword aura burst forth from the edge of his blade, severing Demons and Spears alike. Turning to his side, the courier smashed down on the guard holding his waist with his elbow, crushing his skull, killing him instantly. With another back kick to the stomach, the Demon guard was sent flying into the air.

Yet, that moment of delay allowed the Imperial Guards to gather in front of the wounded Yun Qian Xue, forming a wall of flesh and bones. Facing against the “courier”, they each raised their shield and spear in anticipation. In the darkness, the deafening call echoed: “Assassin!” “Protect the General!” as rapid, running footsteps came from all directions towards them.

Somewhat disappointed, and after a slight moment of hesitation, the “courier” eyed the wall of guards standing between him and Yun Qian Xue, then leapt backwards, vanishing into the darkness.

Terrified, the guards all sighed in relief. That was one hell of an assassin! Some of the guards shouted angrily to the darkness and wanted to chase, but the officers stopped them, saying: “No one leaves! The General’s safety is our main priority!” Everything happened so fast, yet, it ended even faster. Still alive, the upper body of the guard, who was cut in half through the waist, twitched wildly in the mud. His dreadful wail made everyone’s teeth chatter. In the end, his comrades were forced to give him the mercy of death.

Another report came: “We have defeated the raiders. Do we chase after them?” Yun Qian Xue spoke as calmly as possible while fighting off the pain: “No need. Prepare our retreat.” Both he and his men suffered greatly from tonight’s attack. He could no longer follow Stirling at his current state.

While struggling against the pain, Yun Qian Xue bandaged his wound. He had to stay awake at all cost to organize the retreat, but there was no way he could remain calm. That light, the image of that seemingly radiating blade had seared deeply into his eyes, constantly flashing before him. In the back of his mind, the same question echoed over and over again: Who? Who was that terrifying assassin? Underneath that helmet, in the instant he looked back, the moment the shock of his missing shoulder struck him, Yun Qian Xue saw the bloodthirsty

eyes of the assassin burning with madness and despair, like the monster born in the deepest halls of hell.

He shivered uncontrollably. What a frightening man! Searing through his shoulder like a hot iron rod, another wave of pain struck him. He gasped. Unable to resist it this time, he gave in to the endless darkness...

Imperial Calendar, Year 780, January 14th, Imperial Guard Commander, the young Demon General Yun Qian Xue and his forces were attacked by unknown intruders. General Yun Qian Xue himself was gravely wounded from the battle...

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Under the cover of the darkness, another army marched on the plains of Grey Waters. In front of them, the Central Army's base camp was lit with torches.

Chang Chuan asked: "Sir, you were the one shouting the loudest: Attack! Charge!"

Luo Jie added: "But the moment fighting started, you were gone! Luckily I was too smart for your tricks, or else I would have died for sure..."

Bai Chuan complained: "ZiChuan Xiu, you better have a damn good excuse this time! It is not the first time either. How come you are always nowhere to be found whenever things get hairy?! You are seriously beginning to get on my nerves... And what is the black stuff you are wiping on my uniform?"

"I'm terribly sorry. You see, my stomach was acting up again. It was hurting nonstop. So I had no choice but to get away from the battle..."

"Bullshit! Even that wouldn't have taken two hours!"

"Well. I have tried. But my stomach has a mind of its own..." ZiChuan Xiu spoke with a serious face: "Please believe me, I'm just like you. I have done everything I could, and made all the sacrifices necessary to ensure our victory. I really did my part!"

"Oh yeah? What did you do?"

"Well, I was like, you know, silently cheering you guys on from a place far away, praying for your safe return... While I pushed hard with all my stomach muscles, I prayed even harder, and finally, the Gods heard my prayer..."

“Fuck off! Go die!”

“Eat shit! You despicable coward!”

Bai Chuan frowned: “Watch your manners, don’t stoop down to his level! And Sir, you haven’t answered me yet! What is that black stuff you were wiping on my uniform?”

“That is a long story. I can tell you if you promise to not get mad at me!”

“Hurry and speak!”

ZiChuan Xiu cleared his throat: “It is like this. I forgot to bring any wipes with me, and there was no place to wash my hands either. So you know... do you understand? Hey! You promised to not get mad at me! How dare you break your promise! That is low even for you! I have never seen someone so shameless! Help! Someone!”

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The night of January 15th, on the eastern bank of Grey Waters, Xiu’s Company’s cavalries joined forces with the Central Army.

The two brothers were finally reunited. For some reason, Stirling did not seem happy at all. He told him coldly the moment he saw him: “Xiu, you shouldn’t have come. I won’t be able to explain to Lady Ning!”

“Hoho, brother, there is nothing you need to worry about! I have already got rid of that pain in the ass on your back! We can cross the river tonight!”

“You shouldn’t have come, Xiu” Stirling repeated the same words as he took ZiChuan Xiu to the top of a nearby hill, pointing across the river: “See for yourself!”

As far as the eyes could see, an ocean of torches burned brightly on the opposite bank of the river. Countless banners danced in the nightly gale between every hilltop. And beyond, even further into the distance, several fiery snakes were moving to join the great mass of flame over night. Even the stars paled in comparison to their numbers.

Prince Kadun’s forces had arrived, blockading the western bank of Grey Waters, cutting off the Central Army’s and Xiu’s Company’s retreat.

# Purple River - Chapter 9.1

## Chapter 09 Part 01 - Prelude

City of Payi, an important military stronghold located in the province of Dusa. Naturally, it wasn't as sturdy as the world's largest fortress, Fort Warren. Both the extent and the qualities of its defensive fortifications were much less impressive, but as a stronghold, it was well protected by high walls and a moat.

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Earlier this week, a large Demon Army had barricaded themselves on the western bank of Grey Waters. Due to the Demon Prince, Kadun's arrival, any chance for Stirling's Central Army to continue their retreat westwards by crossing the river had vanished completely. As the encircling lines of the Demon Army closed in on Stirling from all fronts, the Central Army had less and less space to manoeuvre. In order to avoid getting surrounded in the open, Stirling was forced to retreat back to Payi. His only chance was to reinforce the city's defences as much as he could before the enemy's arrival.

At dusk, from the west, the direction of the Grey Waters, shapes of black began to march over the horizon. Everywhere in the city, alarms and trumpet echoed, signalling the riders to settle their horses and the infantries to man the walls. They were as ready as they could be. Soon the noises were swept away by a wave of silence, leaving only the sound of wind soughing over the high walls, where the great banner flapped mightily in the wind.

Standing on top of the wall, Stirling could see the black mass slowly inching towards the city.

After crossing the Grey Waters, Prince Kadun's forces were the first ones to

arrive. Armed with swords, spears and longbows, the Demons fanned out from the west, forming a huge moon shaped formation around the City. Carried by the wind, the sea of banners swayed high above the gigantic Demon Army. Like an endless forest, the black mass engulfed everything west of the City. Yet, those weren't even the bulk of the Demon Army. They were only the hundred-thousand advancing forces of the Seneya Tribe, led by Prince Kadun.

Halting their advance at the open clearing three kilometers from the city, the enemy forces started to make camp. The terrifying visages of the Demon soldiers were faintly visible in the distance. A dozen Demon riders even rode closer to the walls, taunting the defenders with unintelligible words and twisted faces. Even though ZiChuan Xiu knew exactly what they were saying, he was not interested in repeating those words. However, the Demon riders were surprisingly cautious in their approach as they never once came within the arrow distance.

The night came, but the darkness did not. All the villages, farms and houses... every building in the vicinity of the City were set to the torch. Everywhere, fires burned and smokes drifted to the sky, washing the dark clouds with a layer of crimson. At the nearby forest, terrified birds and animals scattered wildly in opposite direction, leaving only their shrieks echoing in the darkness.

All the trees near the City were cut down, by both the defenders and the attackers. The Demons used the wood to fortify their camps, and the defenders simply wanted to make it harder for the enemy to approach undetected. Illuminated by the countless bonfires, Prince Kadun's forces worked hard throughout the night. By dawn, the small forest near the city was turned into an open field, giving way to a massive encampment three kilometers from the city. Even though it was still smaller in size than the City of Payi, the massive wooden structure came into being overnight. The speed and the effectiveness of the Demon Engineers were certainly not to be underestimated.

Stirling prohibited his forces from attacking, and as a result, the advancing Demon Forces were allowed to continue their work undisturbed.

Under the cover of night, more and more Demon reinforcements arrived. Two, three, ten, then a hundred divisions crept into view. Wherever they passed, an unbroken stream of torches brightened the dark skyline. A single strand split into hundreds of cords made of light, snaking further and further, stretching longer

and longer, all the way to the end of the horizon. Where the bright pinpoints of light on the ground met with the stars in the sky, like a river converging with the ocean, the border between heaven and earth blurred. From every direction, countless sparks of light surged towards the City of Payi, like a mighty roaring tsunami.

By dawn, the shape of the enemy forces became visible to the naked eye, and it was truly a sight to behold. Behind the thin layer of the morning fog, countless men and horses lined up shoulder to shoulder, their faces indistinguishable. There was no formation left to speak of. The endlessly snaking lines of the Demon Army covered every inch of visible land around and beyond the city in a black mass. They stood firmly against the walls of Payi, crushing and pressuring the City and its defenders under their mountainous weight.

Holding their breath, the hearts of human defenders pounded in their chests as they watched the mighty Demon Army in silence. The Demon faces were all so frightening, and their number was beyond count. Their army was a boundless ocean, and their banners, the clouds floating above. As far as the eye could see, the dark uniform of the Demon Army blackened the sight.

It was the ultimate showdown between man and Demon. The most famous General of ZiChuan, who had yet to lose a single battle since the beginning of the war, would have to face the mighty Demon Empire and the huge army of the Far Eastern Rebels. In the imminent frontal confrontation, who would come out ahead?

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At the Demon encampment, Prince Kadun, Duke Rudy, General Yun Qian Xue and many other generals stared coldly at the high walls of Payi looming behind the lingering mist. The same thoughts coursed through their minds. Their most feared opponent was standing on top of that wall! It was the final battle! Once they took care of him, nothing else would be able to stop their mighty army!

They all knew the battle would be a long one, and incredibly vicious, but the outcome was almost certain. On one side, there was Stirling's Army —a force of less than a hundred thousand. On the other, the entirety of the Rebel Forces from every province in the Far Eastern Regions, and the entire might of the



Demon Army from every city and village in the vast territories of the Demon Empire. A humongous gathering of non-human races which had materialized in front of the human defenders overnight, like monsters coming out of a nightmare.

The black skinned lowborn Demon Soldiers from the Seneya Tribe cursed and shouted at the defenders, each one louder than the other. In terms of body size, they weren't any taller or bigger than the Humans, but they were much fiercer. The rest of the world had come to know them for three qualities: brutality, toughness and stupidity. The thought of the upcoming battle alone was enough to make them tremble in excitement. The only thing they ever believed in was absolute power, and their simple-mindedness made them the perfect soldier for the Highborn —who usually did the thinking for them.

The hairy Beastmen were much taller and bulkier than the lowborn Demons, but at the same time they were also the most superstitious race within the alliance. They were afraid of god, lightning, or anything they couldn't comprehend. Compared to the vicious Demons, they were much gentler in nature. That is, as long as they weren't provoked. They were also firm believers of the warrior code —honor and glory. In battle, they were fierce and brave, but they also tired quickly. If a battle happened to last longer than an hour, they were usually among the first ones to retreat.

The Serpents were known for their snake-like heads. Their upper body, on the other hand, was surprisingly similar to that of a Human; they also had only two arms. Their lower body, however, was clearly that of a snake's. Their long tail frequently writhed around in the mud, their red eyes were full with cunningness and suspicion, and their voices were harsh and bizarre. Despite being one of the many races comprising the alliance, they were often looked down upon by the other races. During the Battle of Fort Warren, they were the first ones to turn tail and run, and if the many battles fought afterwards against Stirling had proven anything, it was the indisputable truth that the Serpents were much better at running away than fighting the actual battle!

Meanwhile, the Dragonkin stared quietly at the walls, wondering just how powerful their future enemies would be. Even though the rumors said the Dragonkin were physically stronger than even the taller Beastmen, their bodies

were not much different than those of the Humans —except for their heads. If a comparison had to be made, their skulls shared many similar traits with the alligators but, according to the Dragonkin themselves, the shape resembled that of a Dragon, the legendary ancient divine beast nesting in the clouds. The Dragonkin also claimed to be the descendants of both Dragons and Humans, hence the name Dragonkin. The validity of their claim, however, could neither be proved nor disproved, since no one had ever seen a real Dragon. However, when a Dragonkin stared at you in silence while chattering its sharp teeth between its massive jaws, it was probably in your best interest not to doubt its words. The Dragonkin were a quiet folk; they rarely spoke, even in battles. Despite their quiet tendencies, they were tough, united, and no doubt the most powerful race in the Far Eastern Regions. Luckily for the others, they were few in number.

Amongst all the races of the alliance, the most terrifying one were definitely the Armored Beasts. Like the middle-class Demons, they were the elite of the Demon Army; huge in size, and over two meters tall, the tough scales covering their bodies were as thick as the armor used by Human soldiers. In spite of their physical prowess and brute strength, they weren't much brighter than the lowborn, and they couldn't move as fast. Throughout the long history of wars against the Demons, the Humans had long been aware of the terror known as the Armored Beasts. The Armored Beasts were best used in a frontal assault. No matter how sturdy the defences were, they could always punch through the enemy lines with ease. Therefore, they were often deployed as the vanguards of an attack. Only the Heavy Cavalries of ZiChuan's Army could match them in terms of destructive force.

In the Demon ranks, the ruling echelon belonged to the upper class of Demons, also known as the Royal Blood. In terms of appearance, they were no different than Humans, but their terrifying power was not something a Human could replicate. They were the perfect combination of power and wisdom. Almost every male born in the Royal families was a natural warrior, and gifted with great intelligence. This was one of the reasons why most of the top tier warriors were born into the Royal family. In addition to their inhuman reaction speed and extraordinary intelligence, they were also cruel and had a much longer lifespan than Humans —often over a hundred and fifty years. It was a race as close to perfection as it gets. Unfortunately, they weren't very fertile, which explained

their small numbers. Even in its most prosperous times, the amount of males in the Royal family had never surpassed a hundred. In addition to that, they were aggressive by nature and often fought amongst themselves. The inability to work together as a whole was as much of a curse to the Highborn as it was a blessing to the Humans.

Aside from the already mentioned races, there were also Dwarfs in the Demon ranks. They might not catch your attention at first due to their limited height — barely taller than a Human's waist, but the huge axes and broadswords in their hands were no joke. They could crush the arm of a Human defender even if the blow was absorbed by their thickest shields. There were also goblins, but they were gentle and kind creatures who mainly served the great army as their servants; caring for their equipment, supplies...

It was a war between Humans and all races in the world. Stranded in the middle of the vast ocean, City of Payi was like a lone boat, shaking from side to side, trying desperately to stay afloat. Beyond the black mass of Demons, thousands of hearts worried for the fate of the Central Army. The city surrounded by the Demons and Rebels could very well become the final resting place for the hundred thousand brave heroes of ZiChuan. On top of the walls, no matter whether it was an officer or a common soldier, seeing the overwhelming size of the enemy forces, the ocean of men and horses, the blinding radiance of their blades and the countless waving banners, their faces all paled as fear reflected from their eyes. It was going to be a terrible storm, a storm that would sweep House ZiChuan and each of them away. It was a test, which the outcome would decide whether they lived or died.

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Commander Stirling of the Central Army patrolled the walls, inspecting the defences. He carefully noted the weakness of the western wall, where the merlons of the battlement was too thin and in need of reinforcing. He oversaw the task personally, even joking around with the soldiers hard at work. "That is a rock, not your wives. You have to treat it with care!" The crowd laughed. His calmness had infected the soldiers around him. Everyone believed that the invincible General would bring them home, safely. Everywhere he went; courage and hope were instilled into the hearts of his men. But no one saw the worry in

his eyes hidden behind his gentle smile.

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Stirling arrived at the part of the battlement entrusted to the Xiu's Company. Seeing ZiChuan Xiu cowering in a corner writing a letter, his smile was gone. He approached him, asking: "What are you doing?"

"I'm writing a will!" ZiChuan Xiu responded without so much as lifting his head.

Stirling didn't know whether he should shout or laugh. "Seriously..." His voice turned serious. "There is something I haven't told anyone. There are no reinforcements coming our way. House ZiChuan doesn't have anything left to send. Right now, they barely have the strength to hold Fort Warren. Where would they find an army big enough to rescue us?"

ZiChuan Xiu continued writing. "Right, I know. Is there breakfast for tomorrow?"

Stirling spoke solemnly. "I'm not kidding. Promise me, if you get the chance, do not worry about us and do not look back. Just make sure you get as far away from here as you can. You came here because of me, if anything happens to you, I won't be able to live with myself!"

"Surely I'm not the only one who has the chance to get away if he tried?"

Stirling shook his head. "I can't. They are all trapped here because they placed their faith in me. If I can't bring them home alive, at the very least, I can join them in death." "And you think I can leave you behind?" ZiChuan Xiu raised his head as he tucked away the letter in his pocket. "Right, I've made up my mind. I will donate my pair of stinky socks to the treasury. Who knows, they might just promote me to Commander after I die."

Stirling laughed bitterly. "Can't you be serious for once? Do you realize the gravity of the situation?"

"I'm being serious, Brother!" ZiChuan Xiu replied in a serious tone. "As brothers, it means that we are willing to live and die together. We have been through worse than this! Besides, they desecrated our lands, killed our people. I hate them to the very core. I can't wait to fight them. Now that they are here, how can I just run away? Brother. We will stand together, and fight them head

on! We will make the Demons fear the name of House ZiChuan!”

Stirling nodded emotionlessly. “Well said! But what is going on behind you?”

Behind him, Xiu’s Company’s soldiers danced and sang, waving flags written in Demon language. “We surrender!” “Hail to the Emperor!” “Hail to the mighty Demon Army!” ...

“Damn it, Luo Jie you idiot! Didn’t I tell you not to show them until our walls are breached?! Put them away quickly...”

“Sir, we are only rehearsing! If we don’t practise the words now, what if we forget them in the midst of chaos?”

“Hmm, you got a point there... But we need to work on your pronunciation. At this rate, they will kill you for insulting their language.”

“Hey, Stirling, wait! I wasn’t finished! Where was I? Oh, right. I said we are going to fight until the bitter end. We will never give up...”

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Inside the Commanding tent in the Demon Encampment, dressed majestically, a tall, skinny and dark faced member of the Royal Family sat in the middle, pondering. Rapid footsteps approached from outside, halting hesitantly just beyond the entrance. The man’s voice trembled slightly. “Your Highness, may I come...”

“Approach!” The Royal Blood interrupted him impatiently.

Marquis Halcyon stumbled into the tent, and immediately prostrated himself to the Royal Blood the moment he crossed the threshold. He stuttered while he kissed the feet of his master. “May Your Highness live forever...”

The Royal Blood moved his feet away in disgust, but did not give him the permission to stand. He spoke harshly. “Marquis Halcyon!”

“Yes. Yes, I’m here! I await your order...”

“You wounded Yun Qian Xue’s shoulder, and killed his men. My brother is asking for your head!”

Still prostrating on the floor, Marquis Halcyon cried with despair in his voice.

“Your Highness is most wise. I did no such thing. I’m being framed! You have to help me, Your Highness!”

“Weren’t you the one telling me that all the Beastmen, Serpents, Dwarfs and Goblins in the Far Eastern Regions only answer to you? Yun Qian Xue’s report says, the enemy contacts were all Beastmen, who claimed it was you who sent them. They even have your Banners and Seal. So you tell me, what was going on. Hmm?”

“Your Highness. The despicable men of House ZiChuan framed me! They must have disguised as one of my unit...”

“I have checked. Stirling’s army is the only army House ZiChuan has left still active in the Far Eastern Region, and there is not a single Beastman in his service. They are all Humans. In case you don’t already know, Marquis Halcyon. His Majesty is most furious. Yun Qian Xue is one of his favourite general. Now you made him a cripple.” Prince Kadun didn’t say out loud what he was really thinking. “If only you got rid of that annoying Yun Qian Xue for good!”

“Your Highness, you have to speak to His Majesty on my behalf. I’m the most loyal servant to the Empire. It was a trap laid by the enemy...”

“I already did. Do you really think your head would still be where it is right now if I didn’t?” “Thank you, Your Highness! I will never be able to repay the kindness you have bestowed upon me. If there is anything...”

“You shouldn’t thank me yet. There is more! I did say my part, but so did my brother. Father hasn’t made up his mind yet. Marquis Halcyon, this is the time to prove your loyalty!”

“Yes, of course. Please show me the way, Your Highness!”

Prince Kadun went straight to the point, pointing towards the high walls of Payi behind the curtains of fog in the distance. “Bring me the head of Stirling! I give you a day. Is that enough?”

Marquis swallowed hard, answering bitterly. “Your wish is my command, Your Highness!”